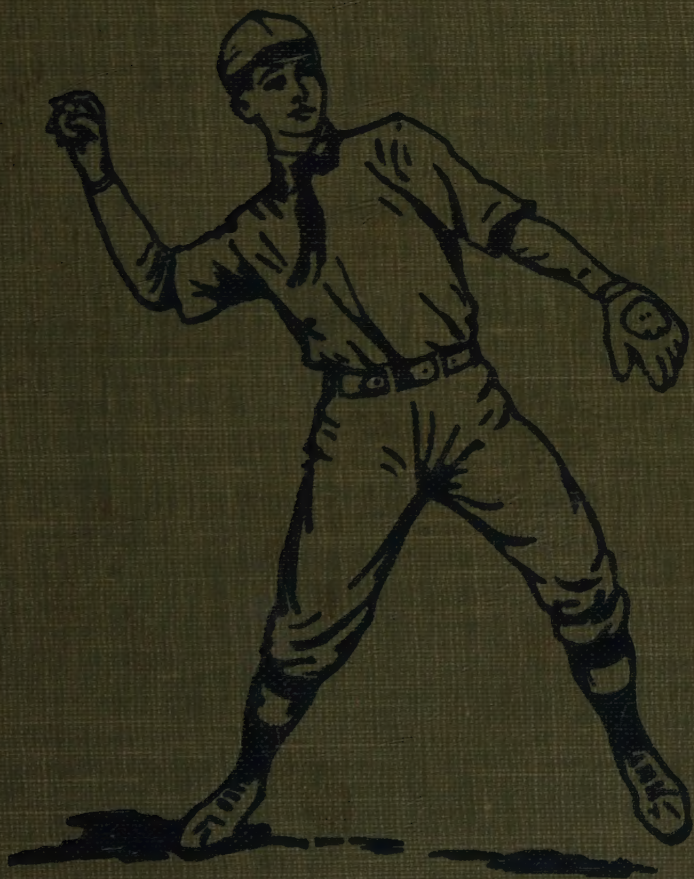
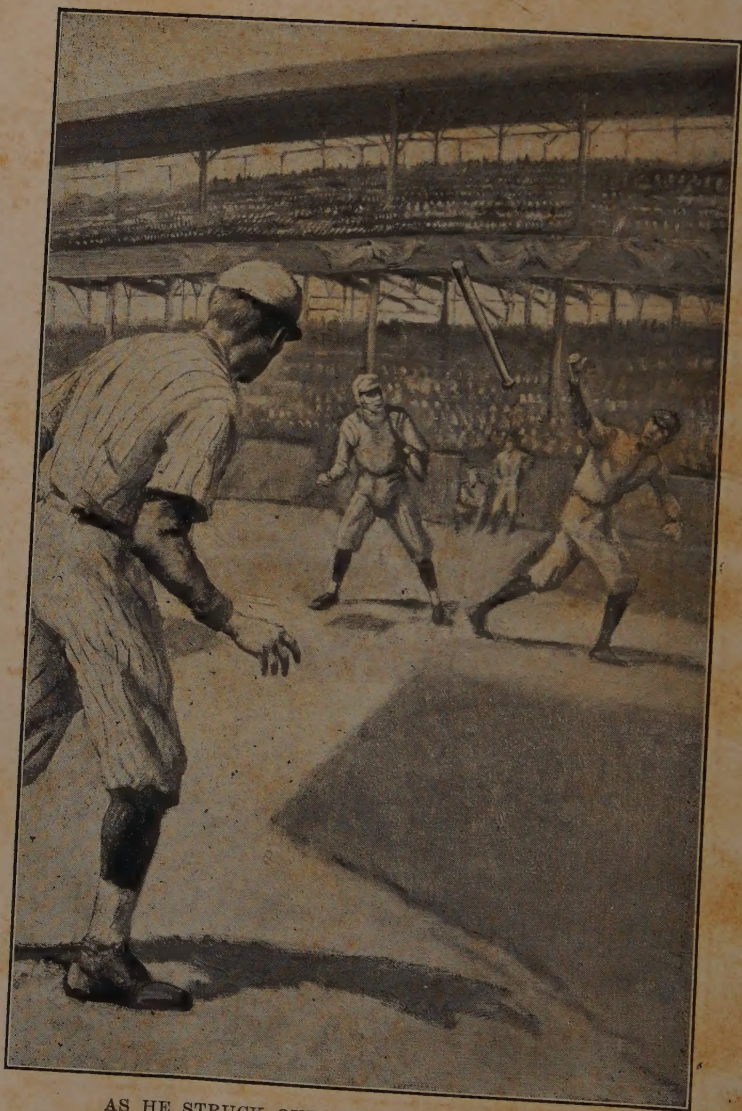


BASEBALL JOE PITCHING



LESTER CHADWICK



AS HE STRUCK OUT, HE HURLED THE BAT
AT BASEBALL JOE.
"Baseball Joe: Pitching Wizard"

Baseball Joe, Pitching Wizard

OR

Triumphs Off and On the Diamond

By LESTER CHADWICK

AUTHOR OF

"BASEBALL JOE OF THE SILVER STARS," "BASEBALL JOE,
CLUB OWNER," "A QUARTERBACK'S PLUCK," "THE
EIGHT-OARED VICTORS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

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Baseball Joe, Pitching Wizard

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BASEBALL JOE, PITCHING WIZARD

CHAPTER I

OVER THE CLIFF

"LOOKS as though it were going to be a regular blizzard," remarked Baseball Joe, as he stood at a window of his father's home in Riverside and watched the snowflakes scurrying before the gale.

"Why should we worry?" returned Jim Barclay, Joe Matson's brother-in-law, and, next to Joe, the greatest pitcher on the team of the New York Giants. "Let 'er bliz! The house is snug and there's plenty of coal in the cellar."

"You lazy thing!" exclaimed Clara, Joe's sister and Jim's wife, as she came and perched herself on the arm of the easy chair where Jim lay stretched out at ease. "You'll grow fast to this chair if you stay here much longer."

"Now, honey, take back them cruel words," expostulated Jim, as he smoothed her hand. "Just think of the times next summer when your poor Jim will be sweltering under the hot sun, pitching his heart out to put another victory in

the bat-bag of the Giants, while you're swinging in a hammock."

"You poor fellow," mocked Clara. "You'll have me crying in another minute."

"By Jove!" put in Joe, "I'll welcome that sweltering sun when it comes. It seems an age since I was standing in the old box winging 'em over. My fingers are itching right now for the feel of the horsehide."

"You won't be any gladder to be there than the fans will be to see you there," replied Jim. "Gee, it was like a funeral last year to have you out of the game. When you come out on the diamond in the spring there'll be a yell that you can hear from New York to Riverside. Sure the old soupbone is all right?"

"My arm never felt better," replied Joe, as he swung it about his head. "Not a twinge left, no matter what I do with it. And the doctor I ran up to see in Chicago told me that it was in absolutely perfect condition. Now if that New York sharp, Hemstreet, puts his O.K. on it, everything will be as it should be."

"He will," declared Jim confidently. "And then maybe there won't be a jubilee in the Giant clubhouse!"

"New York's gain will be Riverside's loss, though," remarked Clara somewhat regretfully. "The town will be all cut up about your going,

Joe. You've put Riverside on the map. Of course, everybody is glad for your sake that your arm is all right again, but they sure will miss you frightfully."

"In a way, I'm sorry to go," replied Joe. "The townsfolk have treated me well and they've backed up the team royally. They deserved to have their nine win the championship of the Valley League. Now it's up to the team to repeat."

"I hope they will," rejoined Jim. "They've got off on the right foot, and if they'll only remember what your coaching taught them they ought to stay at the top of the heap. By the way, Joe, what are you going to do with the club? It ought to be worth a mint of money."

"It's worth thirty thousand if it's worth a cent," replied Joe. "When you consider that it cost me only eight thousand and has been a big money maker all the season, that's a tidy little profit."

"Have you any purchaser in mind?" asked Jim. "Seems to me a lot of fellows ought to be falling all over themselves to get hold of it."

"They are," admitted Joe. "I've had at least half a dozen good offers since it became known that I don't intend to hold on for next season. But I haven't accepted any of them yet."

"You'll have to decide pretty soon," suggested

Jim. "It won't be long now before McRae will be sending out notices to report for spring training practice. Doesn't look much like it now, with this blizzard raging, but it's different down in Florida. Mac's anxious for an early start so as to get the jump on the other fellows."

"Florida!" murmured Clara enviously, as she looked at the whirling snow outside. "The land of sunshine and flowers and balmy breezes! You boys are surely lucky."

"Lucky!" snorted Jim, with a wink at Joe. "Poor, downtrodden slaves of the heartless magnates that coin our sweat and toil into dollars!"

"Tell me another," jeered Clara, as she tousled his hair. "Poor downtrodden slaves that travel in Pullman cars, put up at the best hotels, have six months' vacation, and draw the salaries of bank presidents! It's a sad case, mates."

"It's easy to see that the only place we'll find sympathy is in the dictionary," laughed Joe. "Come ahead, Jim, and let's work off our grief by a hike in the open air."

"It's open, all right," admitted Jim, with a glance at the bleak prospect outside. "I haven't any ambition to be a North Pole explorer. Leave that to Peary and Stefansson and Amundsen and the rest of those fellows."

"Jim Barclay, you get right up out of that chair and put on your coat and hat," commanded

Clara, as she took him by the ear. "I declare, I believe you've got the hookworm. You wouldn't stand up if you heard the *Star-Spangled Banner*."

"Driven from home!" moaned Jim, as he yielded to marital tyranny. "You'll be sorry, honey, when they bring me home frozen as stiff as a board. Then you'll remember all my virtues—which are many—and you'll wish you'd been kinder to me. Then you'll—"

A swift push into the hall cut short Jim's enumeration of his other noble qualities. He and Joe donned their heavy coats and hats and sallied forth.

The gale had subsided somewhat and the snow was falling less heavily. The crisp bracing air was delightful and sent the blood coursing rapidly through their veins.

"Let's make for the river," suggested Joe, as they made their way through heavy drifts. "The wind will have swept that reasonably clear and the walking will be easier."

Joe's prophecy was fulfilled, and they swung along over the frozen surface almost at racing gait.

"Haven't seen McRae's name very often in connection with winter trades," remarked Joe. "Do you suppose the old boy is going to stand pat with the present team?"

"I don't think so," returned Jim. "Mac isn't

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the one to go about with a brass band when he's making his deals, but you can bet that he's been busy under cover. I know he had a couple of comers from the Pacific Coast League in view last fall."

"How about the old standbys? Any of them seem to be slipping last season?"

"Well, I wouldn't say exactly slipping," returned Jim thoughtfully. "Seemed to me that Burkett at first was slowing up a bit and not covering quite as much ground as he did the season before. But his batting will probably keep him his job. Melton at short was a bit of a disappointment. I'm afraid he hits the booze on the quiet. Not quite so fast on double plays as he used to be. But, take it altogether, we've got a good team just as it stands. We came in only third last season, but everybody knows the reason. Pittsburgh and the Cubs wouldn't have nosed us out if you'd been with us. With you in shape this coming year, we'll lick the tar out of them."

"Let's hope so," said Joe. "But those birds will take a lot of licking. What's this I hear of that fellow Bassett, the new Cub center fielder? A regular fence-breaker with the bat, they tell me, and his average seems to bear it out."

"He's all of that," agreed Jim. "He sure can soak 'em. Shoulders like those of Hercules and

an eye that spots the ball, no matter where you try to put it. Hardest man to fool I ever faced. When he hits the ball it certainly does travel. But with all that, he's about the most disagreeable fellow I know. Always bragging, bursting with conceit. His success has gone to his head. Told one of our fellows that he was sorry you'd got out of the game just as he got into it. Said he'd like to have had a chance to show the greatest pitcher in the game just where he got off."

"Is that so?" laughed Joe, his eye gleaming with the light of battle. "Now, that's interesting. I'd really like to have him show me where I get off."

"You'll have your chance," was Jim's assurance. "The day you go in against the Cubs the park will be packed to see the duel between you two, and if you don't stand him on his head, Joe, I'll never forgive you. It will be a pitching wizard against a king of swat. I'll be betting on the wizard, for there's never been a man in the game that could touch you when you were on your mettle."

"Well, I'll do my best," promised Joe. "It will be a great pleasure to meet Mr. Bassett and exchange compliments."

"There'll be plenty of those, too," returned Jim, grinning. "They call him Gabby Bassett. He's always chattering while he's at the plate,

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trying to get the pitcher's goat. He gets them so wild at times that they hardly know what they're doing. Then, of course, they're his meat."

"Better and better," laughed Joe. "At first I was just interested. Now I'm fascinated. I can scarcely wait for the chance to enjoy his conversational powers."

"He'll be deaf and dumb when you get through with him," prophesied Jim. "You sure can put a stopper— Great Scott, look at that fellow up there!"

Jim grabbed Joe's arm and pointed to an elevation a little to the right.

A man was indulging in wild gyrations on an ice-clad hill that sloped sharply downward and ended abruptly at the edge of a deep gully.

He had evidently lost his balance on the slippery incline and was trying desperately to regain it. In vain, however, for, even as the companions stared, the man fell headlong and shot down the slope, falling over the edge of the ravine!

CHAPTER II

AN OLD ENEMY

BASEBALL JOE MATSON and Jim Barclay looked at each other with horror in their eyes.

"That fall was enough to kill that fellow," cried Joe. "Quick, Jim, let's get to him!"

The two started off at top speed, running as fast as they had ever done in trying to make first base. In a twinkling they were at the river bank and had clambered up.

From there on their progress was slower, for the path that led to the gully's edge was almost as slippery as glass. They were moving up the slope, also, which further increased their difficulties. Slipping, stumbling, at times falling, they gradually approached the brink of the ravine.

They strained their ears, hoping to hear some cry for help that would tell them that the unfortunate was still alive. But no sound broke the silence, and the conviction deepened that they would find a dead man at the end of their journey.

They reached the edge of the gully at last and peered down toward the bottom. The ravine was

deep and the shadows were thick, but they could faintly make out a dark, crumpled heap.

"That must be he!" exclaimed Joe. "I'm afraid he's past helping," he added, as he detected no movement in the object.

At that point the descent was sheer and it was impossible to get down. But at a little distance farther along, the side sloped a trifle and there were withered shrubs in the soil that seemed to offer some prospect of a handhold.

Joe and Jim rushed for the spot and let themselves over, reaching the bottom at the expense of sundry scrapes and bruises. Then they plowed their way through the snow, which at this place had drifted deep, and were presently at the side of the man.

He was lying on his back with his eyes closed and his right arm doubled under him. His hat had been driven down over his face, so that only the lower part of it was visible.

Joe and Jim lifted the body gently and deposited it on a snowbank. Joe tore open the coat and put his hand on the man's heart.

"He's alive!" exclaimed Baseball Joe, with great relief. "Loosen his collar at the throat, Jim, and let's chafe his wrists and temples and try to bring him to."

"Any bones broken, do you think?" asked Jim.

"No," replied Joe, as he deftly ran his hands

over the man's limbs. "May have internal injuries, though, for all we can tell. Get busy, old boy." Then he lifted the man's hat from his face and started back with an exclamation of amazement.

"Moe Russnak!" Baseball Joe shouted, as he recognized the features of his bitter enemy.

"You're dreaming!" exclaimed Jim incredulously. "Moe Russnak's in jail."

"He was, but he isn't now," replied Joe. "This is Moe Russnak. Look for yourself."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" muttered Jim, as he confirmed the truth of his friend's words.

While they stand there in utter bewilderment, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the preceding volumes of this series, to tell who Baseball Joe was and what had been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Joe Matson had been brought up in Riverside, a small but thriving town. His parents were estimable people of moderate means whose lives were bound up in their two children, Joe and his younger sister, Clara.

Joe grew up a strong and vigorous youth, frank, manly and courageous. He excelled in all boyish sports, but was especially drawn toward baseball. All the time he could spare from his school and home duties found him playing in some of the vacant lots that the boys frequented.

It soon appeared that Joe Matson had a natural aptitude for pitching, and before long he had at his command a collection of curves and slants which made him feared by the teams that came to measure strength with the town nine.

How he became the mainstay in the box of his home team, what difficulties he met and surmounted, how the envy of rivals sought to discredit him, how in spite of all obstacles he won victory after victory, is told in the first volume of this series, entitled "Baseball Joe of the Silver Stars."

Later on he went to boarding school, where his outstanding work on the school nine won recognition for him, despite the tactics of the bully of the institution.

Following his graduation he entered Yale. Here the unwritten law that gave the preference to veterans and held the freshmen in the background kept him for some time from having a chance to show his ability on the diamond. But such a light as Joe Matson's could not be long hidden under a bushel, and in a time of great stress his opportunity came and he registered a glorious victory for Yale. Nor was it the last, for he eventually became one of the greatest college boxmen that Yale had ever known.

His work in the box for Yale was so sensational that he received an offer to pitch for the Pittston

team of the Central League. Here he made good from the start and soon became the leading twirler of that league. It was evident that he would not long remain in the sticks, and one of the keen-eyed scouts of the St. Louis Cardinals spotted him and he was signed up promptly.

Many players who are sensations in the bush circuit fall down lamentably when they get among the players of the major leagues. Only one who has the stuff can get by there.

Joe Matson got by in record time. One after the other he faced the doughty teams of the National League—the Giants, the Cubs, the Reds, the Dodgers, and all the rest of that famous aggregation. Many of them smiled when the comparatively untried stripling faced them for the first time, but they did not do much laughing after the game was over. Here was a youngster to be reckoned with.

No one realized this more keenly than McRae, the manager of the New York Giants. He was the keenest judge of baseball talent in the country, and he lost no time in acquiring Joe Matson for his team.

Now Baseball Joe felt that he had reached the very height of his ambition, the goal that is dreamed of by all young players. But not for a minute did he relax. He knew that he still had much to learn and from none could he get better

teaching than from McRae. That shrewd old fox taught him all he knew, and what Baseball Joe once learned he never forgot. Before long he was universally acknowledged to be the king of pitchers.

But his strength lay not alone in the box, though that was his chosen throne. His batting was as remarkable as his twirling. He had the eye of a hawk in spotting the ball. His timing was perfect, and he met the ball at just the right fraction of a second to make every ounce of his strength tell. Before long he developed into the greatest batter in the game.

He became known as the home-run king, and people packed the parks all over the circuit in the hope of seeing Baseball Joe clout another homer. Again and again he led the league in home run hitting, and many a game was won thereby that would otherwise have been lost.

The Giants were a great team, but, outside of the pitcher's box, there were other teams quite as powerful. It was Joe's great pitching year after year that brought the championship of the league to New York and later on several world championships.

Second only to Joe as a pitcher was Jim Barclay, who had come to the team from Princeton. He had a great arm and a good head, and a warm friendship sprang up between he and Joe. The

latter coached the young recruit until he became one of the mainstays of the nine in the box. This friendship between the two was still further cemented when Jim fell in love with and married Joe's sister, Clara.

Joe himself had met his fate some time earlier. On one occasion when his team was in the South Joe had been instrumental in saving a young girl, Mabel Varley, the daughter of a banker, when the horse she was driving ran away. Love between Mabel and the stalwart young athlete was not long in developing. They were married some time later and their wedded life had proved ideally happy.

Baseball Joe had not pursued his meteoric career without making enemies, and their machinations against him at times were very serious.

In the spring of the year before that in which this story opens his arm had gone wrong, owing to an injury inflicted by enemies the season before. He consulted eminent specialists who decreed that for a whole year he would have to withdraw from the game unless he wanted his arm to be entirely ruined. The consternation of McRae was great, and Joe Matson himself was shocked beyond measure by the fateful verdict. But there was no help for it and they had to yield.

Joe went back to Riverside to recuperate. He reached there just at the time that the local base-

ball club was placed on the market. Joe saw a chance to stay in the game he loved, if only as manager, and he bought the club. In doing so he incurred the bitter enmity of Moe Russnak, an unscrupulous Jew, who himself had intended to buy the team. Aided by Hupft and McCarney, two former Giants who had been thrown off the team for crooked work, Russnak worked up a scheme that came near costing Joe his life.

How Russnak overreached himself and was sent to jail, how Joe brought a club of tailenders up to the championship of the Valley League, the many thrilling and exciting incidents that attended his efforts, are told in the preceding volume of this series, entitled "Baseball Joe, Club Owner."

Now to return to Joe and Jim as they stood amazed and perplexed at the recognition of Moe Russnak as the man who had fallen into the gully.

"It doesn't matter who it is," remarked Joe, as he gathered together his scattered wits, "he's a human being and we've got to do all we can to get him out of this fix."

"Sure!" assented Jim. "Though I'd rather help any one else on earth."

The two baseball pitchers redoubled their efforts to restore the man to consciousness, and under their vigorous rubbing he at last opened his eyes. They wandered about vaguely for a

moment, and then the man gave a convulsive start as he recognized Baseball Joe.

"Joe Matson!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," replied Joe not unkindly, "it's Joe Matson. But you don't want to get yourself excited. You've had a bad fall. We saw you slip into the gully and we came to help you."

"Oi, the gully!" cried Russnak, with a shudder.

"Oi, oi, what a beesness! What for should I fall into the gully when I wasn't doin' not'ing but goin' about my beesness?"

"That doesn't matter," replied Joe. "The fact is that you're here and we've got to get you out. How do you feel? Are you badly hurt?"

"I am a wreck!" moaned the man. "I am sore all over. Oi, oi, it is de end of Moe Russnak!"

"Not by a long shot!" Baseball Joe said cheerily. "Let's lift you to your feet and see if you can walk."

Joe and Jim drew the man gently to a standing position, but his legs sagged under him and he sank back with a groan.

"It is no use," he moaned. "I am done for."

Joe had been thinking quickly. He knew that there was a farmhouse only a few rods from the bank of the river. The man's name was Yardley, and he and his wife were kindly, hospitable people.

"I'll tell you what we'd better do," Joe said to Jim. "We can manage between us to get him

to Yardley's, and after that we'll 'phone to the hospital and have them send an ambulance for him."

"Not de hospital!" cried Russnak, in alarm.

"Why not?" asked Joe. "You don't know how badly you may be hurt, and the doctors ought to have a chance to look you over."

"No, no, not de hospital!" reiterated Russnak. "I vould have to give my name there."

"Well, why shouldn't you?" asked Jim impatiently. "Look here, Russnak, how did you come to be here, anyway? I thought you were in jail."

A furtive look came into the Jew's little eyes.

"Didn't you hear dot it vas a pardon I got mit de Governor?" he asked.

"A pardon!" exclaimed Joe. "Why, you'd just begun to serve your sentence. You were sent up for two years. On what ground did you get a pardon?"

"It vos because of my hard luck," replied Russnak. "Ven I vos sent to jail I left all my property in de hands of a friend of mine. And vot did dat low-life do but clean me out? He has robbed me of all I had and now I am not'ing vorth! De Governor he heard of it an' he t'ought I vos punished enough and so it vos mit a pardon dat he sent me out."

Joe and Jim looked at each other. The story had been told glibly, and not knowing what politi-

cal influence might have been brought to bear, they did not reject it as incredible. Similar things, they knew, were occurring all too often. At any rate the man was in hard luck now, and they had no time to probe his story.

"Well, we'll take you up to Yardley's, anyway," Joe summed up his conclusions. "After that you can send for a doctor if you insist on not going to the hospital."

"Oi, oi, a doctor!" groaned Russnak. "Dot costs money and I have not a cent."

"I'll take care of that," replied Joe. "Come, Jim, we'll lift and carry him out of this gully. When we get out on level ground perhaps he can walk part of the way."

They put their strong arms under the man and with great difficulty, for he was of heavy build, made their way up the banks of the gully. They were drenched with perspiration when at last they reached the higher ground and paused to rest.

They encouraged Russnak to make an effort to walk, and he found that he could do so after a fashion. With an arm thrown over the shoulder of each of his deliverers, he progressed painfully and slowly until at last they came into the yard of the farmhouse.

Mr. Yardley was at home and came out to meet and help them. Mrs. Yardley, all sympathy,

bustled about and prepared a bed for the injured man and saw that he had every comfort.

When the party had left him to himself and come down again to the living room Joe explained more in detail the story of the accident. He did not mention Russnak's name or imprisonment, for, with his usual generosity, he thought that if the man were indeed making a fresh start he did not want to do anything to prejudice him.

"I think he ought to have a doctor," Joe said, "though he objected because he had no money to pay him." He drew a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket. "This," he said, as he handed it over to Mr. Yardley, "will cover any expense to which you may be put, including the doctor's bill. I'll keep in touch with you and when this is gone will supply anything that may be necessary."

Mr. Yardley objected to taking the money, but Joe insisted.

"I'm responsible for bringing him here without consulting you," Joe declared, "and if you take care of him, the least I can do is to furnish his expenses. It's good of you to be willing to undertake the burden of caring for a stranger who has no claims on you."

"Well, what do you know about that!" remarked Jim, as the two young men bade good-by to the farmer and his wife and turned their steps homeward. "To come across Moe Russnak of

all people in the world when we thought he was safely behind bars!"

"It was queer," agreed Joe thoughtfully. "How the Governor let him out is beyond me. He was fairly tried and convicted and there didn't seem the slightest ground for mercy. I suppose the fellow had a pull of some kind."

"Singular we haven't seen something about it in the papers," ruminated Jim.

"Been tucked down in some out-of-the-way corner where we didn't see it, I suppose," replied Joe.

"But if the thing was straight, why should Russnak have such a mortal dread of the hospital finding out his name?" persisted Jim.

"I don't suppose he's especially proud of that name," returned Joe. "I wouldn't be myself, if it had the prison stamp upon it. All I'd ask would be to keep it quiet."

A pleasant surprise awaited the two young men when, on entering the living room of the Matson home, their eyes fell upon a youth, dressed in the extreme of fashion, lounging in an easy chair and engaged at the moment in carefully adjusting his tie.

"Hello, Reggie!" came from the lips of Joe and Jim as they went toward him with extended hands.

"Didn't think you'd be back from your New

York trip for a couple of days yet," remarked Joe.

"Didn't myself," answered Reggie. "But got through my business a little sooner than I expected. Beastly bore, business, don't you know?"

Reggie Varley was the brother of Joe's wife. His acquaintance with Joe had begun rather inauspiciously in a railroad station, when Reggie had accused Joe of stealing his bag and had narrowly escaped a thrashing in consequence.

Reggie had a weakness for clothes and always dressed like a fashion plate. He also cultivated what he fondly thought was a London drawl and accent, and his conversation was studded with bits of British slang. Altogether Joe had not been keen on having Reggie for a brother-in-law, but had accepted him as a necessary evil.

He was agreeably surprised, however, as he learned to know Reggie better to find that the latter possessed a host of good qualities. He was a baseball fan, which would have gone far with Joe Matson toward covering a multitude of sins. Then, too, he was kindly and generous to a fault.

Reggie, too, to use his own expression, was not such a fool as he looked. He was a good business man when he put his mind on it. It was due to him that Russnak's villainy had been exposed and the rascal sent to prison. Reggie's help had come at a critical time for Joe, and his clever detective

work had made it possible for Joe's team to present its full strength in the deciding game of the season and win the championship.

"How's the wing getting along, old chap?" asked Reggie, as he carefully resumed his seat in such a way as not to disturb the crease in his trousers.

"Fine and dandy," replied Joe. "I'll be whizzing them over for McRae again when the bell rings."

"I'm bally glad to hear that!" exclaimed Reggie. "The Giants will take on a new lease of life, what?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Joe. "What I do know is that it will feel fine to be with the boys once more."

"What's the matter with your hand, old chap?" asked Reggie. "It seems to be bleeding."

"Oh, that's nothing," replied Joe, as he looked down at the scratches he had received in scrambling down the gully. "By the way, Reggie, Jim and I met an old friend of yours this morning."

"Meanin'?" drawled Reggie languidly.

"Moe Russnak," replied Joe.

CHAPTER III

ESCAPED FROM JAIL

AT Baseball Joe's words all of Reggie's languor vanished as by magic. He stiffened in his chair as though he had received an electric shock.

"Moe Russnak!" he exclaimed. "Are you spoofin' me? The bloomin' blighter's in jail."

"He was, but he isn't," declared Joe. "As a matter of fact, he's not more than a couple of miles from here, sick in a farmhouse. Had a fall and Jim and I got him over there."

"But—but—" spluttered Reggie, thoroughly bewildered, "how can that be? I heard the judge with my own ears sentence him to two years in prison. And that was only a couple of months ago."

"I know," agreed Joe. "But he says he received a pardon from the Governor. Political pull, I suppose. There's a lot of funny things going on behind the scenes."

"A pardon!" exclaimed Reggie. "I don't believe it. Did he show you the paper?"

"No," answered Joe. "But, then, he wasn't in

shape to show anything this morning. He had a bad fall into a gully, and I don't know how serious his injuries may turn out to be."

"Well, if that fellow's going to be pardoned, they might as well turn all the prisoners loose and be done with it," declared Reggie indignantly. "They don't do things like that in England. After all the trouble I took to get that fellow jailed!" he moaned.

"It's a raw deal, all right," put in Jim. "I'd give a good deal to know what influence worked with the Governor. There ought to be a public protest made against the pardon."

"Too late to do any good now," objected Joe. "When a pardon is once issued I don't suppose it can be recalled. Anyway, Russnak has had a good deal of punishment, if what he says is true about that friend of his having done him out of his property. He has the taint of the jailbird on him, and the tumble he got this morning has just about put the capsheaf on everything."

"What's this I hear about Russnak?" asked Mabel, who came into the room at this moment, a pretty flush on her cheeks and looking, Joe thought, lovelier than ever.

"Why, Sis," replied Reggie, "it seems that the bally blighter has had a pardon from the Governor."

"What?" exclaimed Mabel. "Pardoned after

all he did to Joe, trying to cripple or kill him! It's a shame. He ought to have had a life sentence instead of only two years. And now it's only a few weeks since he was sent to prison. There must be some mistake. I can't believe he was pardoned."

"We're two of a kind there, Sis," remarked Reggie. "I don't believe it either. That fellow's been putting something over on Joe and Jim."

In response to Mabel's questions Joe recounted the events of the morning.

"Maybe he was not telling the truth," Joe admitted. "Anyway, we had no time to verify the matter then. The only thing was to get him to some place where he could be taken care of. You see that, don't you, dear?"

"Of course," conceded Mabel. "He was in trouble and he took you in. Oh, I don't mean it in that way, Joe darling," she said in swift repentance as she saw that Joe looked sheepish. "It's just because you have such a great big generous heart that you'd help your worst enemy, if he needed help. Perhaps, after all, as you say, he's been punished enough. But I can't help worrying now, Joe, that he's free. He may plot some other mischief against you. You know what a malignant brute he is."

The gale, which had subsided for a while, gained renewed fury later on, so that the entire

party was housebound for the rest of that day and evening.

The next day Reggie Varley went down to the post-office ostensibly, though most of his time was spent in sending and receiving telegrams and in extended conversations over the long-distance telephone. In addition, he found time to make a trip over to the Yardley farmhouse.

He returned to the Matson home just as the family was sitting down to luncheon.

"Just in time, Reggie," said Mabel, as he drew up his chair and seated himself beside her. "What on earth kept you so long?"

"Looking at new neckties in the haberdasher's shop, I'll bet," chaffed Jim.

"Nothing like that," countered Reggie. "Quite something else, I assure you."

There was something in his tone that made Mabel look at him curiously.

"You're just bursting with news, Reggie," she declared. "Out with it."

"Nothin' at all," replied Reggie nonchalantly, "unless it's news that Moe Russnak wasn't pardoned at all and that he's an escaped convict."

"What's that?" shouted Joe, jumping to his feet so hurriedly that he upset his coffee on the tablecloth.

"Just that," reiterated Reggie, immensely enjoying the sensation caused by his news. "He

broke jail a couple of days ago. Guards are searching for him everywhere."

"You're dead sure?" asked Jim.

"Got it right from the Governor's office," replied Reggie. "Had his secretary on the long-distance 'phone. Seems that the beggar hid in an empty cask that was going out of the jail yard. He made his escape, all right. Probably had a confederate outside somewhere who gave him clothes to put on in place of his prison suit."

"And I've quartered that jail-breaker on the Yardleys!" groaned Joe, as he made a break for the telephone. "I'll call them up at once and tell them all the facts."

Reggie stopped his brother-in-law with a gesture.

"Wait a minute," he said. "He isn't with the Yardleys any longer. Cleared out some time in the night."

"Cleared out!" exclaimed Joe. "Then he wasn't hurt as badly as we thought?"

"Nothin' but bruises and a shaking up, I guess," returned Reggie. "At any rate, his fingers were in good condition."

"What do you mean by that?" cried Mabel.

"They grabbed everything they could find," replied Reggie. "Got away with Yardley's watch and a brooch of Mrs. Yardley's and about a hundred dollars in cash."

The others looked at each other, stunned.

"The infernal scoundrel!" Joe fairly shouted, clenching his fist till the nails bit into the palms. "To rob people who took him in so kindly! Oh, if I could lay my hands on him now!"

"Probably a good way off by this time," observed Reggie. "With the money he's got he's probably on his way to Canada."

Joe stormed up and down the room like an angry tiger.

"Of course I'll make up their loss to the Yardleys," he declared. "They took him in on my say-so. But, oh, what a fool I was not to look the matter up at once!"

"Same here," put in Jim. "Either one of us ought to have gotten into touch with the Governor's office right away. That fear of having to give his name at the hospital ought to have roused our suspicions at once."

"We must notify the authorities at once," exclaimed Joe.

"Already done," said Reggie with an airy wave of the hand. "I've told the Governor's people all I know, and I called at the Riverside police station and gave them the facts. Take it altogether, I've had a pretty busy morning," he added complacently.

"Good work, old boy," commented Jim.

"Oh, the old brain isn't so bad," declared

Reggie, as he whisked away a crumb with his napkin.

"Come along, Jim," said Joe, whose appetite for lunch had vanished, "let's go over to Yardleys and face the music."

Jim readily agreed, and the two made their way to the farmhouse, where they found the kindly couple considerably upset.

"It isn't so much the money and the jewelry as the ingratitude of the rascal," explained Mr. Yardley. "Melinda here was just as kind as she could be, taking him broths and jellies and smoothing the pillows and covers and acting as if he was her own brother. I wouldn't have blamed him for sneaking away if he thought the police were after him, but there was no need of his robbing us. I declare it's enough to make one lose faith in human nature."

"In Russnak nature, anyway," modified Joe. "It was all my fault, Mr. Yardley, in not telling you all the facts so that you might have been on your guard. But I thought the fellow was so badly hurt that he wouldn't be able to get out for some time, and if he was starting a new life I didn't want to say anything to hurt him."

"It does you credit, Joe," said Mrs. Yardley, who had known Joe since he was a baby. "It's just like your kind heart, and we're not blaming

you any. But it hurt me to have the fellow act like that."

"It was contemptible beyond words," declared Joe. "But you shan't suffer any money loss. Just tell me how much money he took and the value of the watch and the brooch, and I'll write you out a check."

He took a checkbook from his pocket, and although they protested that they ought to bear at least half of the loss, Joe was adamant and covered the amount in full.

"Now I feel better," he announced with a smile, as he and Jim rose to take their leave. "But I'll feel better yet," he added, "when I lay my hands on Moe Russnak."

"I go halves with you on that check, Joe," said Jim, as they went out of the front gate.

"Not on your life!" answered Joe, with the emphasis that Jim knew closed all argument. "I suggested taking him to the Yardleys. I pay Mr. Yardley, and that's all there is to it."

To take the bad Russnak taste from his mouth, it occurred to Joe that there was no better time to spring a pleasant surprise that he had been turning over in his mind for some weeks past.

It was a little while after supper. The girls had cleared away the table, washed the dishes and had come into the living room, where the men were stretched out in easy chairs. Mr. Matson

was glancing over the evening paper. Mrs. Matson was sewing placidly.

Clara started to turn on the radio.

"Let's see what's on," she remarked. "Perhaps we can have a fox-trot."

"Just a minute, Sis," interposed Joe.

"You boys are too lazy to dance," observed Clara, as she desisted.

"It isn't that," disclaimed Joe. "I just want to say something that may be of interest to all of us."

Mr. Matson laid down his paper and Mrs. Matson put aside her sewing. The others looked at Joe curiously.

"It's about the club," Joe began.

"Oh, Joe, have you found some one to buy it?" broke in Clara eagerly.

"There's never been any trouble about that," replied Joe. "I've had half a dozen offers, and another one came in this morning's mail. Good offers, too."

"I hope the lucky bidder will be some one in Riverside," remarked Mr. Matson, who during the year of Joe's ownership of the club had become an ardent baseball enthusiast. "It would be something of a damper on the town pride to have an outsider step in and manage the club."

"What's your highest offer, dear?" asked Mabel.

"Thirty thousand dollars," replied Joe, "and all the others range above twenty."

"Then of course you'll take the thirty thousand one," observed Jim. "At that, the fellow will be getting a good bargain."

"The trouble is that he's an outsider, and, as Dad says, I want the ownership to stay in Riverside," replied Joe. "I have two people in mind that I think can manage the club to the queen's taste. Both of them are baseball enthusiasts. Both have seen the team play many times and are on friendly terms with the players, know their characters and capabilities. One of them is young and can do the traveling with the team. The other is older, an experienced business man, and can handle the accounts and general business of the club."

"Sounds like an ideal combination," remarked Jim. "Who are these lucky fellows and what are they going to pay?"

"They pay nothing," replied Joe. "I'm making them a present of the club."

CHAPTER IV

A ROYAL GIFT

THERE was a chorus of astonished exclamations from the men and of squeals from the girls at Joe Matson's statement. The occupants of the room looked at Baseball Joe as though they thought he had suddenly gone crazy.

"My word!" gasped Reggie.

"Quit your kidding!" exclaimed Jim.

"You don't feel sick or anything, do you, Joe?" asked Mabel.

"That horrid Russnak has got Joe all upset," stated Clara.

"But—but, Joe, just what do you mean? To whom are you going to give the club?" asked Mr. Matson bewilderedly.

"To you and Reggie, Dad," replied Joe. "As Jim remarked, it's an ideal combination."

There was a moment of stupefied silence, blended with relief. At least, Joe now was only half-crazy.

"Joe! My dear boy!" said Mr. Matson huskily, wiping his glasses. Then words failed him.

"But, Joe!" cried Reggie, so agitated that he dropped his monocle. "What—why—how—It's princely, old chap, but really, you know, I cawn't accept it. I haven't deserved it. It's too much. It's—"

"Choke him off, Jim," commanded Joe. "Now listen, folks. There's nothing in this to make a fuss about. I've got a real affection for this club, and I want the management to stay in this family as well as in the town. Dad and Reggie together can manage it finely. It ought to be a good money-maker for both of them, and it's right along the line that they like. There'll be pleasure as well as profit in it. I owe Dad more than I can ever pay. And if it hadn't been for Reggie, we'd have lost the championship. So this is only in the nature of squaring things up. I made a heap of money out of the club last year, and, as you know, I got my full year's salary from the Giants. I'm on velvet. So not another word about it," raising his hand to fend off a torrent of thanks and wonder. "Now, Clara, bring on your fox-trot."

Though the matter was taboo for that night, it was the subject of earnest conversation between the men the following morning as they conferred together about the coming season.

"I think you have a pretty good team as it stands," said Joe thoughtfully. "The men have

learned to play together and the prestige of having won the championship has welded them still more closely. I'd go rather slowly about making any changes. But when it's really necessary, do it without any hesitation."

"We ought to have a great season with the way the town is worked up over the team," observed Mr. Matson.

"I've no doubt you will," replied Joe. "Russnak and those two roughnecks of his, Hupft and McCarney, were the chief trouble makers last year. Now that they're out of the league, you ought to have pretty smooth sailing. The other club owners and players on the whole are decent fellows."

"I'm afraid we'll have to be bothering you rather often for advice," said his father.

"Call on me all you like, Dad," replied Joe. "Remember that I'm not off in Timbuctoo. A wire, a letter, or a long-distance 'phone can get me at any time. Moreover, when the Giants are anywhere near here on their trips, there will be occasional days off that I can take to see you. And you can bet that I'll do it every time I can!"

"It would be fine if you could send us any stray talent you come across," suggested Reggie.

"I could," returned Joe thoughtfully. "There are lots of fine young fellows trying for berths in the Giant club every year that McRae has to let

go. But I don't think it advisable to send them here. All our team now are Riverside boys, and the town is proud of them because of that. There's plenty of young material right here that can be developed to take the places of those that drop out. Local pride is the one great thing we've got to depend upon."

"I guess you're right," admitted Mr. Matson.

"I think so," said Joe. "Then, too, there's another thing to be considered. I'd have exceptional opportunities to get outside talent, and the cry would be raised that it was no wonder the Riverside team could win when Joe Matson was feeding it all the time with players that were almost big league stuff. The other club owners wouldn't have such chances, and they'd feel that the cards were being stacked against them. No, we'd better stick strictly to local talent."

"Right as always, old top," said Reggie. "That old head of yours takes account of everything. We'll do exactly what you say."

"And now," said Joe, "I think it would be a good idea to get all the boys in the team together and tell them of the new deal. It's February now, and any day Jim and I may get a wire from McRae summoning us to go South with the team. I'd like to talk to the boys, get them thoroughly in touch with the new management. Most of them no doubt are in town. I'll call them up and

ask them to come here to-morrow morning and we'll have a conference. What do you say?"

"Fine, old top," replied Reggie, and with a nod Mr. Matson signified agreement. "Go to it. In the meantime your dad and I will go over the books and study the schedule for the coming season."

Joe spent half an hour at the 'phone, found that with two exceptions the members of the team were in town, and made the appointments for the next day's meeting.

That done, he studied the pages of the morning paper. As he had expected, the paper devoted a large section of its front page news to the Russnak matter. There was a general résumé of the dastardly plot against Joe that had resulted in the rascal's imprisonment and a full story of the way he had made his escape. But to Joe's great disappointment there was no news of the man's recapture. State troopers and the local police were making an energetic search for him, and the authorities of all near-by towns had been notified to be on the lookout. But as yet there was no tangible clew to his whereabouts.

"Looks as though the old rascal had made a clean get-a-way," remarked Joe, as he crumpled up the paper in disgust and threw it on the table.

The next morning the Matson living room was taxed to its capacity with the dozen or so athletes,

regulars and substitutes, that represented the Riverside team. They were a fine, wholesome lot of young fellows, every one of whom would have gone through fire and water for Baseball Joe.

"Well, boys," remarked Joe, with a smile, "I suppose you have guessed why I called you together."

"I'm afraid we do," replied Seth Potter. "Something in the nature of a farewell address on your part, I suppose. We've heard that your arm is all right once more, and we've seen in the sporting news that you are going to play again with the Giants this season."

"Guessed it the first time, Seth," replied Joe.

"We can't tell you how sorry we are to have you go," put in Tom Scott. "Of course, we're glad to know that your arm is well, for we know how much it means to you. But it's put us all in the dumps to know that you won't be here to manage us again this season."

"You've put the town on the map and you've worked us into the championship," added Darrell Blackney. "We wouldn't have been one, two, three in the race if it hadn't been for you."

"And you wouldn't have been champions, if you hadn't had the stuff," replied Joe. "I couldn't have done anything with a team of misfits. You fellows have been loyal and hard-working and you deserve the flag. It's been a very happy year for

me—a year that I thought was going to be miserable because my arm had gone back on me. I owe more to you than you owe to me.”

“You can’t make us believe that,” declared Seth, and there was a murmur of approbation from his mates.

“Well, now as to the future,” said Joe. “I’ve disposed of the club.” There was a stir of interest at the announcement. “So I’ve called you together to meet the new owners. They’re regular folks and I’m sure you’ll like them. In fact, I think you do already. They’ve attended most of the games and they’ve got to know you pretty well.”

“They’re Riverside people then?” asked Tom Scott.

“Yes,” replied Joe.

There was a murmur of satisfaction.

“I’m glad of that,” said Seth Potter. “They’ll have more than a money interest in making the thing go. I see they haven’t got here yet.”

“Yes, they have,” replied Joe. “They’re here in this room at this minute.”

There was a gasp of surprise as the eyes of the players fastened on Mr. Matson and Reggie Varley, who had been seated quietly in a corner of the room.

“No real need of introduction after all,” laughed Joe. “You’ve known my father since you

were kids in rompers. Mr. Varley has been a rooter for you all this past season. You remember how he saved the championship on the last day of the season when he brought Moe Russnak to book. Shake hands, boys, with the new club owners, Mr. Matson and Mr. Varley."

There was genuine pleasure in the eagerness with which the players crowded forward, and their cordiality was no greater than that of their new employers. The boys had looked forward with a good deal of doubt and restlessness to the unknown new management that might comprise men who were crabbed, mean, unjust, and with whom it would be hard to get along. It was a great relief to find that their employers were men whom they heartily liked and esteemed.

Mr. Matson and Reggie made pleasant and friendly little talks, expressing their hopes that all the players would give their best efforts during the coming season and assuring them of justice and fair play in their relations with the club management.

"We'll work our heads off, won't we, fellows?" declared Seth Potter, and there was a thunderous chorus of assent.

"That's the spirit!" exclaimed Baseball Joe, and then for the next twenty minutes gave them a talk that wrought them to the highest pitch of enthusiasm. He urged harmony, team play, a

constant keeping on their toes, an observance of early hours and keeping away from dissipation.

His words were earnest and fiery and carried weight because the men who listened to them breathlessly knew that they were not mere words, but expressed the qualities Baseball Joe had shown in his own work and that had made him the greatest baseball player in the world.

"Well, that's that," remarked Joe, as through the window he watched the players passing through the gate. "Hello, here comes a telegraph messenger!"

He himself answered the door, signed for and took the messages, and brought them back into the living room.

"One for you and one for me, Jim," he said, as he tossed one of the yellow envelopes to his brother-in-law. He tore his own open. The message read:

"Get ready Southern training trip. Report New York at once.

"McRAE."

CHAPTER V

OFF FOR THE FRONT

"THE bell has rung!" exclaimed Baseball Joe, as he read his telegram. "I suppose yours reads the same way, Jim?"

"Right," replied Jim Barclay, as he tossed his message on the table. "No more loafing for yours truly. Right on the job now until the leaves fall in October."

Joe's nostrils dilated like those of the war horse that sniffs the battle from afar, and in his eyes was a light of one who sees a vision.

A vision of green baseball parks with white lines leading to first and third and out toward the posts that marked the foul lines; great stands and bleachers black with excited spectators; the thunderous roars of applause that greeted a brilliant play; the crack of the bat as the ball soared into the air and winged its way toward the fence; the struggle of baseball gladiators where all were straining every nerve to win; the countless thrills that for so many people make baseball the greatest sport in the world.

It was a vision that never failed to stir Baseball Joe to the depths. Many times during the past year he had feared that for him it would never materialize again. Yet here was this yellow slip of paper that summoned him to battle; that told him he was once more in the game.

There was unfeigned joy in the eyes of the two athletes as they faced each other; a joy, however, that moderated a little as Mabel and Clara came hurrying in.

"We saw the messenger boy," said Mabel. "What is it, Joe? No bad news I hope."

"Read it for yourself, precious," said Joe, as he handed her the telegram.

She read it and her lovely face became clouded.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed, as she threw herself into his arms where he held her tight. "So soon!"

"I'm afraid there's no help for it, dear," replied Joe gently. "Of course you knew it was bound to come. I'm dreadfully sorry."

"So am I," said Jim to Clara, who was snuggling up to him affectionately.

"Oh, what fibbers you boys are!" cried Clara. "You're both tickled to death."

Mabel looked up suspiciously at Joe, but his face was as grave as an undertaker's.

"You've got us all wrong, Sis," he said reproachfully to his sister. "It's simply the call to

duty. We've got to go, no matter how painful it is."

"Yes, no matter how painful it is," repeated Jim dolorously.

"I can see that you're both suffering terribly," mocked Clara.

"They won't give us any credit, Jim," said Joe. "Now, just to heap coals of fire on their heads and make them ashamed of themselves, I vote that we take them along with us to New York. We'll give them a giddy whirl, take them to all the best shows and restaurants and let them see that we're regular fellows."

"Done!" declared Jim.

The girls were visibly softening in their opposition.

"Well," said Mabel, "I suppose we oughtn't to be unreasonable."

"No," agreed Clara. "Like everybody else, the boys have got to attend to business."

There was hurry now and bustling about in the Matson home, as the quartet prepared to leave for the metropolis. A good, faithful woman was secured to help Mrs. Matson while the girls were away, and on the second day after the receipt of the telegrams the party was on its way to New York.

They reached the city after a pleasant journey, and after the boys had ensconced Mabel and

Clara comfortably in a hotel, they hastened to report to McRae.

They found him deep in conversation with Robbie, the rotund and rubicund assistant manager of the team. Both men jumped to their feet as the young men entered the room, and there was a jubilee of welcome as they greeted them. McRae gripped Joe's hand until the latter winced.

"Easy, easy there, Mac!" laughed Joe. "I need that wing in my business."

"And the Giants need it in their business," laughed McRae, as the party settled back in their chairs. "Gee, Joe, how often I've wished that that old wing was on the job this last season! We'd have come past the post, pulling up, instead of having to be content with a measly third place. Even now I pinch myself to find out whether it's really true or I'm dreaming that Baseball Joe is to be with the team again."

"You haven't felt any worse about my being away than I have, Mac," replied Joe. "It's been a good deal of a nightmare. But we'll just forget it as a bad dream."

"Well, now tell me about your arm," said McRae eagerly. "Are you positively sure that it's all right again?"

"As sure as I can be of anything," replied Joe. "I haven't felt a bit of pain in it for the last

three months. I went to Chicago to have Duncan, the biggest specialist in that city, look it over, and he tells me that it is as fine as silk. He advised me to try it out gently at first and put on speed gradually. I've been doing that in the Riverside gymnasium, with Jim on the receiving end, and he can tell you whether the arm is good or not."

"Better than ever," pronounced Jim. "Joe's got everything, hops, twists, drops, curves, slants or what you would. As for speed—well, it's blinding. I had to beg him to let up or he'd have made me a cripple. Say, when he gets up against the hot babies in this league he'll make them look like also-rans."

"Good!" exclaimed McRae, with infinite satisfaction.

"We'll just run away with the flag," chortled Robbie, his broad face one vast, substantial smile.

"Now all that remains," observed McRae, "is to have Joe see Hemstreet and get his O.K. As there's no time like the present, we'll do it at once," and he reached for the telephone.

He got his number and a short conversation followed.

"It's all right," said McRae, as he hung up the receiver. "I've made an appointment for four o'clock this afternoon, and may good luck be with us."

Promptly at four McRae and Joe were ushered

into the doctor's office, where they were cordially greeted by the famous specialist.

"Here we are again, Doctor," said McRae. "But we're under a little more cheerful circumstances than when you saw us last. Mr. Matson thinks his arm is all right again. I want you to tell us whether it is or not. If you say it isn't, the Giants are in to drop a cool half million this year. If you say it is, I'll be the happiest man in New York. But, of course, don't think of that. All we want is the exact truth, whether it is good or bad."

"And you shall have it so far as I know it," promised the doctor. "Now, Mr. Matson, if you'll strip to the waist, I'll look you over."

Joe did so, and for the next half hour the arm was subjected to every possible test, handled, flexed, bent, twisted.

Joe's mind was in a tumult of emotions. All his future career hung on this test. Would he ever stand in the box again? Would he ever taste the sweetness of a victory won for the Giants? Would he ever again be hailed as the greatest boxman of all time?

Or would the verdict of the specialist consign him to the scrap heap, make him a has-been, spell the doom of all his hopes?

And Mabel and Clara and Jim, waiting in apprehension in their hotel rooms for the fateful

verdict! What news would he have to tell them? And if the news were bad, how could he break it to them?

He studied the face of the doctor. But that was purely professional, as impassible as that of a sphinx. He could get no inkling from that.

At last Doctor Hemstreet straightened up. A cold sweat broke out on Joe's brow.

"Absolutely all right," declared the doctor. "Better and stronger than ever. Congratulations, Mr. Matson!"

CHAPTER VI

A WILD WELCOME

MCRÆ shouted as he sprang from his seat on hearing Doctor Hemstreet's verdict, grabbed Joe in his arms, and did a wild dance about the office.

The doctor watched them with an amused smile.

Filled with joy, Joe lost no time in dressing and getting out of the office. He was eager to get to Mabel and the others and tell them the glorious news. McRæ's car was waiting at the door, and the manager dropped him at his hotel.

Joe's rooms were on the second floor, and without waiting for an elevator he took the stairs three at a time and burst into the room like a whirlwind. Three people looked up at him eagerly, but they did not need to ask for the news. His radiant face told them that.

Like a flash Mabel was in his arms, sobbing from sheer happiness. Clara, too, was weeping, and Jim, unable to find an unoccupied hand to grasp, pounded Joe on the shoulders like a maniac.

When they had regained some measure of con-

trol of their feelings Joe told them of all that occurred in the doctor's office.

Then nothing would do but that Joe must send a long telegram to Riverside—a telegram over which Mrs. Matson cried happily while Mr. Matson wiped his glasses, which had suddenly become misty, and Reggie tried to remember the choicest bits of British slang that would most merrily express his feelings.

Joe and Mabel, Jim and Clara, took in the best show for which they could get tickets that night, not caring what price the scalpers asked for them. Then they went to one of the best restaurants in New York for a late supper, where the waiters looked at their tips with wonder and their departing patrons with marked respect.

"Bet you a nickel that without looking at the papers I can tell you what will be first page news this morning," said Jim, when they had finished breakfast the next day.

"You're on," Joe took up the wager. "Now name it."

"Baseball Joe returns to the Giants' pitching fold," replied Jim. "There," he said, as he unfolded the paper and put it before Joe's eyes, "I win. Hand over your nickel."

Sure enough, Jim was correct. Spread over the front pages of all the metropolitan dailies with big headlines was the story of Joe's arrival in

New York, his visit to Dr. Hemstreet, and the verdict of that noted specialist.

Editors had given more space to this than to anything else in that day's paper. There were columns upon columns devoted to New York's favorite. McRae had called up the papers as soon as he had returned from the doctor's office, and in a little while he had been besieged by swarms of reporters hastily dispatched by the newspaper managers with orders to get the story from every angle. And McRae, keenly alive to the boost that would be given to the Giant club, had, as Jim expressed it, "ladled it out in bucketfuls."

When that immediate item had been exhausted, there was an extended review of Joe's notable career ever since he had joined the Giants. Indeed, they went back further than that, to Yale, to the high school team, almost to his cradle. There was a host of incidents relating to his marvelous pitching, his steadiness under fire, his refusal to crack at critical moments, the craftiness with which he had outguessed and befuddled his opponents, his wonderful headwork, his arm of iron and nerves of steel.

Turning to the editorial pages, it was found that every paper had made his return the subject of a leading article that, in more measured phrase

but with quite as deep conviction, emphasized the laudations of the news columns.

"They've certainly laid it on thick," commented Joe, pleased, of course, as no one could help being, yet somewhat embarrassed by the unstinted praise.

"Not a bit too much," said Clara emphatically.

"Not half thick enough," declared Mabel fondly, who had been eating up the praise showered on her distinguished husband. "If they knew you as I know you, they'd have said a lot more."

"One thing is certain," said Joe laughingly to Jim; "and that is that I won't lack for good press agents as long as my family keeps its health."

Later on, the newspapers from other cities, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, and Chicago, were at hand. They had also given large space to Joe's return, for it was not purely a local matter but of interest to the entire sporting population of the United States.

It was amusing to note the contrast between them and the New York dailies. While the outside journals all gave full credit to Joe for his great ability and wonderful prowess as a pitcher and a batsman, there was evident a current of uneasiness as to the effect his return would have on the pennant chances of their respective clubs. That it would help them financially was admitted, for the announcement that Baseball Joe was going to pitch always crowded the parks around the

entire circuit. But that it spelled injury to their own championship prospects, they fully realized. The outlook for their pets was not nearly as rosy as it had been with Joe Matson out of the game.

More than one hint was dropped that perhaps New York was rejoicing too soon, that the verdict of the doctor might have been too sanguine, and that when Baseball Joe actually took up the pitcher's burden his arm would be unable to endure the strain.

"What crocodile tears they would shed, if that proved true," laughed Jim.

"The suggestion is father to the hope, I guess," agreed Joe. "Let's trust it will be disappointed."

After lunch the girls departed happily on a shopping trip, and Joe and Jim took a taxi and were driven to the Giants' headquarters.

There they found most of the team assembled. And when the other players caught sight of Baseball Joe a shout went up that threatened to raise the roof.

"Joe! Joe!" came in a bedlam of delighted cries as they crowded about him.

CHAPTER VII

IN TRAINING

THE welcome by his team-mates was so wild, so absolutely unrestrained, that Baseball Joe's heart swelled and for a moment a mist came over his eyes. It was something to have such a greeting from royal good fellows that knew sportsmanship when they saw it.

There they were, all the good fellows that he had led so often to victory on hard-fought ball fields—good old Burkett and Larry and Mylert and Curry and all the rest, their bronzed faces alight with unfeigned joy and affection.

There, too, was Robbie, fairly hugging him in his delight, his round face as radiant as the full moon; and McRae, as jubilant as the others and still enraptured with the good news he had heard the day before.

Laughing, blushing, and stammering, Baseball Joe at last disentangled himself from the mob.

"Almost looks as though you were glad to see me again, fellows!" he exclaimed, in tones that were a trifle unsteady.

"Glad I" cried Larry. "That's no name for it. The good news has driven us all nutty."

"Sure the old wing is right on the job?" asked Marvin.

"As sure as anything can be," replied Joe. "The best doctors in the country say so, and they ought to know, and I've been testing it a lot lately with never a pain."

The hubbub gradually subsided and McRae called Joe over to his desk.

"Of course you'll be captain again, Joe," the manager stated. "I've missed your brains this year almost as much as I have your pitching and batting power. You're a born handler of men, and with you on the job the team can't go far wrong. The boys know that you are just and fair, and at the same time they know that you won't stand for any nonsense."

"Thanks, Mac," replied Joe. "I'll do my best."

"I'm taking quite a bunch of rookies to the training camp," went on McRae. "I haven't seen any of them in action, but their records in the minor leagues were rather impressive, and I've had good reports on them from the scouts. I'm depending on you to bring them along, round out the rough spots, and see if there's really championship timber in them."

"I heard from Jim that Melton wasn't going so good," remarked Joe.

"No, he isn't," replied McRae. "I'm afraid he drinks. Several times I've had to fine him for not showing up in condition. It's a pity, too, for he's a nice fellow in many ways and he has everything that a shortstop ought to have. If he'd only take care of himself, he'd be the best shortstop in the league. I'm depending on you to get next to him and try to jack him up. He thinks you're the greatest thing that ever happened, and what you say will have weight with him. If it doesn't—well, he'll have to go."

"I'll see what I can do with him," promised Joe. "I hate to see such a bright young fellow go wrong."

"Of course you've seen in the sporting news that we're going to Florida to train," said McRae.

"Yes," replied Joe. "Jacksonville, isn't it? I'm rather surprised at that, for I thought that you'd sworn off on Florida."

"I had, rather," admitted the manager. "But that was when the wild real estate boom was on. The boys got the craze, and they were more interested in real estate than they were in base hits. But the boom is over now, and there'll be nothing to divert them from their training."

"Just when do you propose to start?"

"Three days from now. Robbie will start

to-morrow to give the finishing touch to the hotel arrangements and to see that the grounds are in shape. The rest of us will leave on Friday, and the following Monday will be our first day of practice."

Some further time was spent in discussing the details of the trip and then Joe and Jim returned to the hotel.

"Three days from now!" exclaimed Mabel, when she heard the date of starting. "I was hoping it would be at least a week."

"Cheer up, girls," laughed Jim. "You can buy a lot of things in the next three days."

"It isn't necessary that you start back for Riverside the very day we leave for Jacksonville," said Joe to Mabel. "Stay another week in New York, if you like."

"No," replied Mabel, "I don't care to stay unless you're with me."

The time flew by as though on wings, and Joe and Jim outdid themselves in giving the girls a good time. But the hour for parting came at last, and after putting the girls on the noon train for Riverside Joe and Jim repaired to their own train that was scheduled to start for the South an hour later.

The journey was a pleasant one and they reached Jacksonville on time and without incident. They had Sunday to rest in, and bright and early

on Monday morning they repaired to the city baseball park, which they found was a surprisingly good and well kept one.

Before they indulged in any practice, McRae gathered the members of his team around him.

"Now, boys," he began, "we're starting the training season in earnest. You've had a long vacation, but it's over. There isn't going to be anything that looks like vacation from now till the end of the season. And when I say season I don't mean the league season. I mean the end of the World's Series season, for of course the Giants are going to cop the flag."

A chorus of cheers arose at this, interspersed with shouts of "Sure thing!" "You bet we are!" and others of like nature.

"That's the right spirit," commented McRae. "A team that doesn't believe it's going to win is licked at the start. But it isn't going to be a walkover. There are three or four teams that think they have as good a chance to win as we have. Two of them nosed us out last year. They believe they'll repeat that feat."

"Not with Baseball Joe back in the game," sang out Larry, and there was a torrent of applause.

The manager smiled.

"I agree with you there," he said, while Joe blushed and looked uncomfortable. "Joe's return has made the team immeasurably stronger than

it was last year. At the same time, I don't want you to expect him to carry the whole team on his back. There are nine positions on the team, and the men that fill them have got to do their share of the work or I'll know the reason why.

"While we're on that subject," McRae went on, "I want to say that Mr. Matson will be captain of the team, as he was year before last. You know as well as I do that there's no brainier captain in the league. You know, too, that he's just and fair. Remember that he'll have complete charge of the team on the field. What he says goes. Don't appeal to me against anything he says or does, for I won't go over his head. His word is final. Get me?"

They "got" him without difficulty. There was an emphasis in his tone that left no room for doubt.

"Now as to you new men," the manager continued, glancing toward the rookie contingent. "I've never seen you play. I've had good reports of you, or you wouldn't be here. But for the next few weeks I'll be watching you like a hawk. I'll note your good plays and I'll note your bad ones. There won't be much that will get by me. Naturally, you'll be a little nervous in fast company and no doubt you'll make errors. I'll make all the allowance for them that they deserve. By

the end of the training season I'll know pretty well what kind of players you are.

"Just one thing more. There must be no dissipation, no drinking, no keeping late hours. A man that sits up roistering half the night is no good on the diamond the next day. We're not paying you counterfeit money for your services, and we don't want counterfeit work. No liquor and no late card games. Any one who breaks these rules will get short shrift from me, if I catch him.

"That's all I have to say now, but you'll hear plenty of talk from me before the season's over." There was a general smile at this, for they knew that a file was smooth compared with the rasp of McRae's tongue when a stupid play was made. "Get out now on the field and limber up. Go a little slowly at the start, though. You young rookie pitchers, especially, don't throw your arms out on the first day. There'll be time later to show your stuff when you've got the winter kinks out of your muscles. Get along now. Play ball!"

CHAPTER VIII

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

"PLAY BALL!"

That utterance by the Giants' leader made the men's nerves tingle. Veterans and rookies alike were thrilled by it. Now at last they were embarked on the work that would not end until the flag was won in October. They scampered out on the field like colts released into pasture.

Joe and Jim were as lithe as greyhounds, owing to the exercises they had taken in the Riverside gymnasium for the last two months, but most of the men were considerably overweight. The first thing necessary was to reduce their waistlines and improve their wind.

So they were formed in line and raced around the park under the hot Southern sun. Many times they circled it until they were drenched in perspiration and some of the old-timers were panting. But pride kept them up to the mark until, when at last McRae gave the signal to break ranks, they were ready to drop.

"That ought to have taken off a couple of

pounds apiece at least, and the rubbing table will be good for another pound," observed McRae, grinning. "Now let's see what you know about base-running."

A deep bed of sand had been laid on the first base line and extending about fifteen feet from the bag in the direction of the home plate, so that the men could throw themselves on the ground and slide without danger of injury.

"Nobody goes into that bag standing up," declared McRae. "Throw yourselves down and slide. And don't go into it headfirst. Aim to hit it with your hand and hold on to it while you slue your body round to the right or the left, as the case may be, so that the baseman can't tag you."

One by one the men took their position at the plate. A rookie pitcher, making no attempt to deceive the batter, served up easy balls that were knocked to some member of the infield. Then, while the ball was being fielded to first, the batter ran to the initial bag at full speed, throwing himself down and sliding according to McRae's directions. Many of them found the ball waiting for them and were touched out, but others justified the strategy by escaping the outstretched hand of the baseman by a hair's-breadth. More than one base hit was registered that would have been a sure out if the runner had gone into the bag standing up.

After that there was a short session of batting and fielding practice. Two or three batsmen standing in the vicinity of the plate knocked flies to the outfielders, while others confined their work to hits inside the diamond.

While this was going on, the rookie pitchers were teamed up with members of the pitching staff, and, choosing different parts of the bull pen, went through the motions of putting it over. It was scarcely more than that, for though the new recruits were eager to show their stuff beneath the watchful eyes of McRae and Robbie, the astute manager vigorously forbade them to let themselves out.

"You'll have plenty of time to show me how good you are," he said, with a touch of good-natured sarcasm. "What I want you to do to-day is just to limber up. The speed and the curves can come later. Just now I'm interested in watching your style, your stance in the box, the time you take in winding up, the quickness with which you turn and pretend to put it over to first, the way you put your body behind the pitch. Believe me, there's lots more to pitching than slants and swiftness, though, of course, later on I'll want a lot of those, too."

Thus admonished, the ambitious young athletes did their best to demonstrate that they were in the first-string class. Again and again McRae

called their attention to faults he wanted corrected, and they submitted with due meekness.

In the meantime, Joe had teamed up with Mylert and Jim with Rumbold and they were limbering up without overexerting themselves. They had been too long in the game to need any advice about starting gradually.

Both Joe and Jim were delighted to find the condition they were in. Their muscles rippled smoothly under the skin, the knots had been already ironed out by their practice in Riverside, and each felt that, if it were necessary, he could go into a real game and do justice to his great reputation.

"How does the old wing feel, Joe?" asked McRae, as he stood for a moment at his king-pin's elbow.

"Never better, Mac," replied Joe, with a smile. "Nothing to show that the X-rays ever bothered it. Not a single muscle that isn't strictly on the job. Have all I can do to hold myself in. Wish the season opened to-morrow."

"That's the best music I've heard for a year," declared McRae. "I can see already the old championship flag flying from the staff on the Polo Grounds. By the way, Joe, I've given orders to enlarge the grandstand section so that it'll increase the seating capacity by thousands. Even at that, we'll be turning them away when all New

York tries to crowd in at once to see you pitch your first game."

Following a prolonged practice came the showers and rubdowns, and then McRae was content to call it a day.

"But to-morrow and every day after that during training there'll be two sessions a day if the weather permits," the manager stated. "If the Giants fall down this season, it won't be for lack of work. And the first man that whines or shows a disposition to shirk—well, I'm not an over-merciful man."

In the succeeding days McRae kept his promise to the full. Gradually increasing the amount of work, he was soon driving his men on at full speed. The waistbands began to shrink. Hands grew hard, faces became bronzed, eyes were brighter, feet were swifter. Before long they were like a pack of greyhounds straining at the leash.

A letter came to Joe one day that caused him some surprise and gave him food for thought.

It was an abusive letter, abounding in coarse epithets and expressions. But the burden of it was contained in one sentence that was heavily underscored:

"You have ruined my whole life, so look out for yourself."

Joe reread the letter curiously. Who had sent it? There was no signature, no heading. It was in typewriting on plain white paper. The postmark was Chicago.

That the sender hated him was evident. Baseball Joe had made many enemies by refusing to fall in with crooked schemes. He could have named a dozen offhand, any one of whom might have written the screed.

He showed the letter to Jim.

"The cowardly skunk!" exclaimed Jim, handing it back. "What do you make of it, Joe?"

"Oh, one guess is as good as another," replied Joe. "At any rate, it isn't worth noticing. If any one really intended to do me a mischief, why should he warn me and put me on guard? Maybe the idea is to get me to worrying so that it will affect my playing."

"Could it possibly be from Russnak?" asked Jim thoughtfully.

"Maybe," assented Joe. "But I shan't worry about it."

It soon became evident that not as many of McRae's rookies as usual would get the ax. There was a surprising amount of good material among the bushers. Jervis, a young recruit from the Pacific Coast, was showing beyond question that he had in him the makings of a star. At short he was as quick as a flash in taking the

ball on either side and shooting it down to first, and no daisy cutter was too hot for him to handle.

Dilworth, too, was covering a lot of ground in center field. His judgment of the ball was good and usually when the "pill" came down it was into his outstretched hands. He had an arm of iron, too, and could put the ball into the home plate on a line.

With a good prospect for the infield and the outer garden, McRae also had picked up three excellent pitchers who only needed experience to be of great value to the pitching staff. There was Moore from a mid-Western minor team whose curves were extremely puzzling; Rockby from the Tri-State, who had speed to burn, Teller who had both speed and curves in first-class measure and was a shark at keeping baserunners close to the bags.

As for the old standbys, they were in the main as good as they had been the year before. Burkett seemed to be feeling just a bit the burden of the years and was not quite as spry about first as he had been. But his batting eye was just as good as ever and his heavy hitting could not be spared from the lineup.

Melton, at short, was something of a problem. As a rule he scintillated, making miraculous stops and throws. There were times, however, when he booted or fumbled, sometimes on easy chances

that ordinarily he would have eaten up. Still, all athletes make mistakes at times, and Joe, though a bit uneasy from what McRae had told him, was not inclined to bear down on the lad for errors which, after all, were comparatively few and far between.

One evening Joe had written a letter to Mabel, and as he was anxious that it should go by the night mail had gone downtown to post it.

On his return, he was taking a short cut through a side street when the door of a basement resort that Joe conjectured was a speakeasy opened, and a man with rather uncertain gait came up the steps to the level of the sidewalk.

"Poor fool," thought Joe, as the man lurched slightly toward him. "Poisoning himself with bootleg liquor."

The lamps of a passing auto threw a flood of light upon the man's face and Joe recognized Melton.

CHAPTER IX

PUTTING THEM OVER

MELTON also gave a gasp of consternation as he recognized his captain. The shock had an instantaneous sobering effect on him.

Baseball Joe stood for a moment regarding him sternly.

"So I've caught you with the goods," Joe said curtly, his eyes boring through Melton like gimlets. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

Melton hung his head sheepishly.

"Just having a little talk with some friends of mine down there," he said. "No harm done."

"A little talk," said Joe sarcastically. "I can smell liquor on your breath. You can't put anything over on me, Melton. You've been drinking. Your walk would give you away, if nothing else."

"Just a little sip to be sociable," muttered Melton.

"I know all about that sociable stuff," replied Joe. "You come along with me."

He led the way to a little park, followed by Melton. They found a vacant bench under a tree and seated themselves.

"Now listen, Melton," said Joe. "I've been longer in the game than you have and I've seen a lot of things. I'm going to talk to you not as your captain but as man to man.

"You're just starting your league career. You've got the makings of a star in you. In fact, you are a star already. When you're fit there's no better shortstop in either league than you are. I know a ballplayer when I see one.

"But I've seen other ballplayers, dandies. They had everything. They got big salaries. They had hosts of friends. They had nice families, wife and kids. To-day some of those men stop me in the street to beg a dollar.

"How did they get that way? Drink.

"Not one of them ever dreamed at the start that he would get into that condition. Like you, they took 'just a little sip to be sociable.' Then the little sips became bigger ones. Then they got so that they couldn't do without the stuff. I tell you, Melton, the only way a man can lick John Barleycorn is by letting him alone.

"That is true of every man. But it's especially true of an athlete. Liquor spells his ruin. He can't drink and keep in condition.

"A ballplayer has only a comparatively short time in which he can make money. Ten or a dozen years, perhaps. He's got to make hay while the sun shines. But with the salaries that

are paid nowadays a good player ought to be on velvet by the time he begins to slip. Then he can get into some nice business and make more money.

"Is that worth while? Or is it better to be a drunken bum asking for handouts, or, if you don't get quite as low as that, getting a miserable living by odd jobs? And, sure as shooting, that will be the end unless you cut out liquor. I'm speaking as your friend, Melton. I hate to see a young fellow go wrong."

Melton had braced himself for anger, for biting scorn, for a fierce dressing down. But Joe's tone had been so kindly, so free from bitterness that the lad—he was scarcely more than that—was melted to the core.

"I'm sorry, Joe," he said, and his voice was far from steady and there was a curious mist before his eyes. "I'm ashamed clear down to my boots. I promise you that I'll never touch another drop of liquor as long as I live."

"Is that straight?" asked Joe.

"Yes," replied Melton, "I swear it."

"Good!" exclaimed Joe. "Shake hands on it. Just stick to that and I'll count this the best night's work I've ever done. Come along now and let's get home."

It proved indeed a good night's work, for Melton kept his word to the letter. Moreover, from

that time on his attachment to Joe amounted almost to adoration.

At the end of the first two weeks, the training had so far progressed that McRae lost his fear of sore arms and told his players to go as far as they liked. So now the practice became fast and furious. No longer did the pitchers just lob up the ball to the men. They put all they had on it and played with all the energy that they expected to show in the regular games later on.

Jim was better than ever in the box. Markwith and Brady and Merton of the first string showed that their arms had not lost their cunning. Moore, Rockby and Teller of the rookies were also rounding to in great shape.

But it was Joe's work that above all else filled McRae and Robbie with exultation. That good right arm of his had all the strength of a lion and the cunning of a fox. His control was superb, his curves broke just where he wanted them, and his speed was blinding. Yet so graceful and easy was he in all his movements that his work seemed almost effortless.

"Isn't he a wonder, John?" exclaimed Robbie, his round face glowing with satisfaction, as he and the manager sat on the bench, watching Joe wing them over to Mylert.

"And look at that!" exclaimed McRae, as he noticed a peculiar undulation of the ball. "I've

been in baseball thirty years and I never saw that stuff. It isn't a curve, it isn't a drop, it isn't a hop. What in thunder is it?"

"Hey, Joe," called out Robbie. "Throw that same ball again, will you?"

Joe grinned and complied.

The ball left his hand as though intended for a straight fast one. But about half way to the box it rose and fell, rose and fell again, and then dipped down in a swift inshoot.

"Either that ball's bewitched or I am," shouted Robbie. "For the love of Pete, Joe, how do you do it and what do you call it? I thought I'd seen every pitch in baseball, but that gets me."

"Oh, if I called it anything, I'd name it the snake ball," laughed Joe. "It's just a queer snap of the wrist as I let go that does it. I've been trying it out this spring at Riverside, and now I can throw it any time I want it."

"It's a snake all right," declared McRae delightedly. "Gee, Joe, you'll have every fence-buster in the league standing on his head trying to hit it. Here, Burkett, Curry, Barrett," he called to three of the heaviest batters on the team. "Come up here to the plate and let Joe toss you a few. Don't say anything about the new ball to them, Joe," he cautioned in a lower tone, as the three athletes came hurrying up in obedience to

the summons. "But use that and nothing else. I want to give these fellows an eyeful."

"Here we are, boss," remarked Burkett.

"Yes," replied McRae. "I just want to see how good Joe's arm is against you boys that call yourself sluggers. He thinks it's all right, and I do, too. Still, there's nothing like putting things to an actual test. I want you to try to knock the cover off the ball. I'm handing out a ten-dollar bill to the first one of you false alarms that cracks out a straight hit. Fouls and bunts don't count."

"Get your coin ready, boss," grinned Burkett, as he selected his favorite bat.

"I'll be the umpire," declared McRae, "and I'll give every one of you boys a square deal. Go ahead, Joe, and don't forget what I told you."

Joe let go with his snake ball. Burkett poised his bat, seemed as though he would make an offer at it, thought better of it, and let it go by.

"One strike!" called McRae. "Why didn't you strike at that ball, you boob? It split the plate."

"I see it did," admitted Burkett, rather dazedly. "But how did I know it was going to?"

There was a roar of laughter at this.

A bit chagrined, Burkett planted himself for the next ball.

It came in undulations, and Burkett made a desperate lunge at it and missed by half a foot.

"Two strikes!" called McRae, while Robbie hugged himself in glee.

"Say!" exclaimed Burkett as he caught Robbie's grin, "what is this anyway, a plant?"

"Just straight baseball," remarked McRae. "Don't use any alibis. What are you there for but to hit the ball?"

A third came sailing over, and again Burkett missed it by a good three inches.

"Out!" cried McRae. "You were easy, Burkett."

"Frozen hoptoads!" exclaimed Burkett. "I've just been murdering the ball in practice. Must have lost my batting eye all of a sudden."

"Come along, Curry, and take your medicine," called McRae, grinning.

With a bit less confidence, Curry came to the plate.

He fouled off the first ball. On the second swing his bat met nothing but air. The next also was a strike.

"Two strikes!" called McRae. "Is my money counterfeit that none of you fellows want it?"

Curry spat on his hands at the taunt and squared himself determinedly.

"You're out!" cried McRae in high feather, as the ball shot past Curry's lunging bat.

"Wriggling snakes!" cried Curry, in disgust,

as he threw down his bat. "I thought I was facing a pitcher and not a magician."

"Now for that tenner," mocked McRae, as Larry Barrett came to the plate.

Joe snaked the ball over, and Larry swung at it wildly.

"One strike!" called McRae.

The next ball was a foul.

"I'd call that a strike in a regular game, but it doesn't go here," commented McRae. "You see I'm giving you every chance in the world."

The next ball was so bewildering that Larry did not even offer at it.

"Two strikes!" called McRae. "That was a beauty, Larry."

There was determination in Larry's eyes as he set himself for the next one.

Plump! It shot into Mylert's glove like a catapult four inches under Larry's desperate swing. Larry looked at the grinning McRae and Robbie with bafflement in his eyes.

McRae took a ten-dollar bill from his pocket and waved it tantalizingly before the bewildered trio.

"Nobody want it, eh?" he chortled. "First time I ever knew you fellows to pass up easy money. Well, if you absolutely refuse it, I'll have to put it back," restoring it to his pocket with apparent reluctance. "But tell me one thing,

boys. Is he good? That fellow over in the box, I mean," he added, pointing to Joe. "His name's Matson. One of my new recruits. Do you think he'll do for the big league?"

"Well, yes," replied Larry, grinning. "Of course, he's got a good deal to learn yet, but he may do as a relief pitcher once in a while. But honestly, Joe, what do you call that thing? I've faced all kinds of pitching, but that had me buffaloed."

"Same here," muttered Curry.

"Stood me right on my head," admitted Burkett. "Gee, Joe, I'm glad I don't have to face you in regular games. My batting average would go 'way down. What is that dinkus, anyway?"

"Oh, just a new wrinkle I've been practicing on," replied Joe carelessly. "I thought there might be something in it."

"Something in it!" exclaimed McRae. "There's a pennant in it for the Giants. We'll have a strangle-hold on every other club in the league. It's the greatest thing that's happened in baseball since Hughson introduced the fadeaway. The snake ball! That snake sure can bite!"

Joe felt that he was treading on air as he made his way toward the hotel that evening after practice. He was alone, for Jim had had an errand to do in town.

"I'll bet there's no happier fellow in the coun-

try than I am," he cogitated as he pursued his way. "Think of what a change from last year! Then I was in the doleful dumps for fair. Told by the doctors that the old arm was no good and that I'd have to lay off for a year. Didn't know but what that might mean forever.

"Even a year's a pretty long time for a ball player to be on the shelf," his thoughts resumed. "Thought I might get too rusty ever to be polished up again. But so far from hurting me, the rest has done me good. Never felt better in my life than I do this minute. And as for the old arm—"

Words could not express Joe's affection for that trusty member. He flexed it within his sleeve, exulting in the rippling smoothness of the muscles. No catch there! Not the sign of an ache! Baseball Joe was himself again.

He had been so absorbed in his thoughts that the sight of a familiar face jolted him unpleasantly from his abstraction.

The face, though familiar, was not attractive to Joe. It was the face of an old enemy, McCarney!

Then, by McCarney's side, Joe saw the latter's crony and co-rascal, Hupft!

CHAPTER X

AN UNEQUAL BATTLE

BOTH McCarney and Hupft had hated Baseball Joe with deadly enmity ever since they had been dismissed from the Giants for crookedness.

That enmity had found occasion for expression only the year before, when, in collusion with Russnak, they had been the leading figures in an attempt to kidnap Joe, flog him, and force him to leave Riverside.

In the brief glance Joe gave them, he saw that they were not alone. With them were two other would-be ball players, disreputable and discredited hangers-on, who found in the blacklisted rascals congenial spirits.

They were at the entrance and partly within a narrow alley, and as Joe came on whispers passed from one to another, while the group eyed him sneeringly.

"There goes the biggest bluffer in the game to-day."

It was McCarney's voice. Hupft added sneeringly:

"Yeah. The first game he plays will show him up."

"Look at him," came McCarney's voice again. "Pretends he doesn't know we're talking about him."

"Afraid to trust that bum arm of his in a scrap, perhaps," added Hupft.

Joe wheeled and came slowly back to the openly derisive group. His mouth was grim and his nostrils dilated. Otherwise he gave no sign of the anger that surged within him.

"What are you after, McCarney, and you, Hupft?" he asked. "I've thrashed you both before. Are you looking for more trouble?"

"Thought maybe you'd get the idea after a while," said Hupft, with an insolent grin.

"If we pulled your leg hard enough," added McCarney, confident in the odds of four to one.

"There's an old saying that a fair exchange is no robbery," returned Joe, with dangerous gentleness. "By your own confession you've just pulled my leg. Now suppose I pull your nose."

Before McCarney could guess his intention or draw back, Joe reached forward swiftly and tweaked the rascal's nose. It was no gentle tweak. McCarney howled, and his face grew crimson with rage.

He lunged for Joe, but the latter dodged in under his uplifted arm and brought his right fist

into crashing contact with McCarney's jaw. It was a terrific, perfectly placed blow, and McCarney hit the sidewalk.

Instantly the crowd was upon Joe. Numbers gave them courage, and they set upon him like a crowd of cutthroats.

There was not one among them who did not envy Joe his supremacy in the baseball world. They were a shady lot, who had been thrown out of the national game for dishonest practices, and they were bitter against the game and all its leading figures. Only McCarney and Hupft had a more explicit cause of enmity; yet all four set upon him, urged by a malign desire to see the great laid low.

Joe fought like a wildcat.

Hupft came in contact with his flailing fist and raised a hand to his bleeding nose. Joe caught him again on the point of the chin with a blow that staggered him.

"How does that feel?" gasped Joe. He dodged a blow for the jaw. "Anything the matter with that arm you were talking about, you low-down rascals? Or is it more proof that you want?"

McCarney picked himself up from the ground. If ever face expressed the desire for revenge, it was McCarney's as the fellow looked malignantly at Baseball Joe.

Then he waded in, and there was a medley of whirling fists as Joe darted in and out, dodging here, twisting there, and getting in smashing blows wherever they could do the most good.

Even a wildcat can be overcome by numbers. Joe's enemies kept closing in. He was caught with a stinging blow to the ear that sent his head over sideways to his shoulder.

Some one had hold of his arm and was trying to twist it over his shoulder.

Joe whirled about and with his other fist gave the fellow a crack that shook him from head to heels.

Now both hands were free again, and he used them to do terrible execution. But not for long. His assailants were crowding him up against the wall of the alley and seeking to pin his arms to his sides.

So far the furious fight had attracted only a few street urchins, who hooted with delight and urged the combatants on.

This time it was Hupft that Joe sent to the sidewalk. But in a moment his arms were caught and held fast, making his head an open target for blows.

Then, abruptly, he felt the crush about him give ground. The grip on his arms relaxed.

"Cheese it, Hupft!" he heard McCarney say. "We'd better beat it."

Joe was dizzy and a bit confused as he watched the flight of his enemies. Why had they left him so suddenly and in what seemed to be panic haste?

On this score he was not left long in doubt. Several of the members of the Giant team hurried up to him, Jim Barclay among them.

"For the love of Pete, Joel!" cried the latter, "what was going on?"

"Plenty," replied Joe, as his fingers explored tentatively a tender and rapidly swelling lump on his head. "It's good you fellows turned up. Four to one is too many."

"Who were the fellows?" asked Jim.

"McCarney and Hupft and a couple of their cronies," answered Joe. "A pleasant time was had by all," and he grinned.

They looked up and down the street, but could see no trace of the thugs.

"That's just one more score we have to settle with those fellows," said Jim grimly. "You sure look bunged up, Joe."

Joe grinned with evident enjoyment.

"It was a peach of a scrap," he declared, "and if you think I'm bunged up, you ought to get a look at some of them."

But Joe's friends could not dismiss the affair as lightly as he seemed to. Despite the pitcher's protest, they insisted upon accompanying him as a sort of bodyguard to the hotel.

"How's the old wing, Joe?" asked Jim, in great anxiety. "That wasn't injured in the scrap, I hope."

For answer, Joe flexed his arm and laughed.

"Not a bit," he assured his brother-in-law, "unless you count a couple of knuckles skinned against McCarney's jaw. No, the old soupbone is ready for whatever comes."

"What do you suppose those fellows are doing here, anyway?" mused Jim, who still remained considerably upset by the attack on his friend. "I hoped we'd seen the last of them. They're bad medicine, Joe."

"Oh, they're just hanging along on the fringe of things, I suppose," answered Jim carelessly. "Looking for a chance to play outlaw ball, perhaps, since they've been kicked out of decent company."

"That may be," admitted Jim. "But don't hold them too lightly, old boy. They hate you like poison. Keep your eyes wide open."

CHAPTER XI

THE MAN WITH THE BLACK BEARD

MCCARNEY and Hupft, with their confederates, had escaped quickly when they had detected the approach of reënforcements for Baseball Joe, choosing alleys and short cuts familiar to them and only halting to compare notes when they felt at last safe from pursuit.

"Hard luck!" growled McCarney, whose face was like a raw beefsteak from the terrific blows that Joe had landed. "Why couldn't that crowd have stayed away a few minutes longer? We'd have done Matson up brown, then."

"Don't know whether we would or not," grumbled one of his associates, whose eye was swelled almost shut. "Why didn't you tell us you were sicking us onto a catamount? That fellow would make a fortune in the ring. When he hits, you feel as though a house had fallen on you."

"He can be licked like any one else," snarled Hupft, as he felt gingerly of his swollen nose.

"If four isn't enough, we'll have six next time. We'll get him yet."

"Not with my help, you won't," declared the fourth of the group. "I don't want any more of his game. I know when I've had enough."

"Aw, quit your beefing," snapped McCarney. "See you later down at Shaughnessy's joint. Better separate now, or the cops may get curious and ask nasty questions as to what we've been fighting about."

Hupft and McCarney proceeded at a slow and slouching pace to what they called their home. It was a third-rate boarding house in a poor section of the town.

They were in an execrable humor. Once Hupft grunted something under his breath and McCarney told him in no uncertain tones to "shut up."

"No use crying over spilled milk," growled McCarney. "We did the best we could, so quit hollerin'."

When they came to their boarding house they saw, not without a feeling of surprise, that some one was sitting on the porch. Visitors were rare at Mrs. O'Malley's, and this man, to the best of their knowledge, was no regular boarder.

However, their interest in the stranger was purely impersonal. Absorbed in their gloomy thoughts, they tramped up the steps and were

about to enter the house when a soft, oily voice arrested them.

"Just one minute," said the bearded stranger, without rising from his chair. "I have somethings to say to you shentlemans."

What was there in that soft voice that caused the ex-ballplayers to start and change color? They stood very still for a moment, staring at the man with the black beard.

It was McCarney who first advanced toward him, slowly and with a curious caution.

"Who are you?" he asked.

The bearded man smiled. His eyes crinkled slyly at the corners. The oily voice was still more carefully lowered.

"You not know me—no?" he asked.

McCarney and Hupft exchanged glances. McCarney's lips framed the one word:

"Russnakl!"

Hupft shook his head.

"He's in jail," he responded.

The bearded man laughed softly.

"Is it then that your old boss has to introduce himself to you?" he asked.

With one swift gesture McCarney swept away the black beard, revealing the lower part of the stranger's face.

The man clapped a hand to his smooth-shaven jaw and uttered a howl of fright.

"Oi, you vill expose me!" he cried. "Give me back dot beard! Give it back, I say!"

McCarney spoke roughly.

"Shut up!" he commanded. "Do you want to alarm the neighborhood?"

"Do I vant to alarm the neighborhood? he asks me yet!" gasped the man. "Maybe he takes me for a fool. Give me dot beard so dat folks won't know me."

"Russnak!" muttered Hupft, as if he could not credit the evidence of his senses. "How in the name of Pete did you get here? The last we heard of you you were in j—"

"Don't say it," interrupted the Jew with a frantic gesture of his hand. "Do you vant to put me back in it? Oi, such a beesness!"

McCarney gripped the man by the shoulders.

"Listen!" he commanded roughly. "What's the right steer on this, anyway? How did you get out of the jug? What are you doing in this neck of the woods?"

"I vus pardoned," declared Russnak, lowering his voice and looking around fearfully.

"Pardoned nothin'," declared McCarney. "You mean that you broke jail—"

"Oi, don't say it!" cried the man. "Man to man I ask you—don't say it! Vy are you so rough on your old boss dat paid you goot money

ven you worked for him? Once my frent you called yourself, and now—"

"Stow the gab," directed McCarney brutally. "We don't want a jailbird round here rousing suspicion and maybe getting the cops after us. Your coming here ain't going to do us any good, and you better beat it while the going's good. Get me?"

"A heart like a stone he has," wailed the Jew. "I get you in no trouble if I have my beard." Then as McCarney's grip tightened on his shoulder he whined:

"I got a goot reason vy it would be goot for you you should t'ink twice before you go back on a frent." He peered slyly into McCarney's face. "A very goot reason."

"Then tell us about it." This came from Hupft, who had edged his way up until he stood beside McCarney and in front of Russnak. "Cough it up and be quick about it."

Russnak shook his head.

"Not here," he said craftily. "Ve vill go to your room—yes?"

Once more Hupft and McCarney exchanged telegraphic glances. They had no belief in the pardon story. They had no doubt whatever but that Russnak had escaped from the jail in which he had been incarcerated. They knew that the presence of an escaped convict, should he be found

in their room, might have serious consequences for them.

The thought flashed across them, however, that, if a reward were offered for his capture, it might be a windfall for them. But they dismissed this thought almost as soon as it was formed, because if they gave up the Jew there was the possibility—the very great probability—that Russnak would retaliate by telling facts that McCarney and Hupft were very anxious should be buried in oblivion.

But their curiosity was piqued by the fellow's statement that it would be well for them to think twice before turning the cold shoulder to him. What was the "good reason" that had prompted him to seek them out? There was just a chance that it might be of benefit to them.

The upshot of their cogitations was that they told the Jew brusquely to go up with them to their room.

"First I'd better return your beard," said McCarney, suiting the action to the word. "Under the circumstances you can't be too careful, Russ—"

"Oi!" interjected the Jew, "he even calls me out of my name—"

"All right, Smith," said McCarney, with a harsh laugh. "Come on up to our room and get the agony over with."

Russnak adjusted the beard with great care. When he got started up the stairs he staggered a little as though from weakness.

"No knowing when he's had his last meal," thought McCarney.

"It is that I am hungry," explained Russnak. "All my money is gone for train fare. The railroads is robbers."

When the room was reached McCarney went to a cupboard, took out a loaf of rye bread, some cheese, a bottle of milk, and placed them on a table.

The eyes of the Jew gleamed ravenously. He snatched at the food.

"Since yesterday this time I have not touched food," he stated. "Oi, that Moe Russnak should sink so low yet!"

"He may sink lower yet," remarked McCarney coldly, "if he doesn't give us a good reason for wishing himself upon us. But don't give us any more of that pardon slush. You wouldn't be wearing a false beard if you'd been pardoned. Not that I blame you for getting away from the jug if you could. But give us the straight goods."

"Come on, spill it," Hupft prodded. "Tell us the sad story of your life."

Thus urged Russnak motioned the two men to draw their chairs closer around the table. Then, still wolfishly devouring his bread and cheese and

drinking the milk in great gulps, he told of his escape from prison and his subsequent experiences. He did not tell, however, of his robbery of the good folks who had befriended him. Even Russnak did not care to boast about that.

When he narrated his encounter with Baseball Joe and Jim Barclay his listeners began to betray a genuine interest. They listened to him scowlingly, nursing the sore jaws that had felt the impact of Joe's fists. But their faces lighted up as they thought of Joe's chagrin when he learned that he had been imposed upon.

"Pretty good," commented Hupft. "The sap, to fork over a twenty!"

"You fooled him good and proper," chuckled McCarney.

Russnak grinned complacently.

"A good joke, yes?" he said. "But not so good as this other joke I would vish to play. Oi, how you should enjoy this one!"

Hupft and McCarney exchanged glances. The latter nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"All right! Spill it," commanded Hupft.

They drew their chairs closer around the table and began to plot once more against Baseball Joe.

CHAPTER XII

GETTING THE JUMP

"DID you ever see such a crowd, Jim?" asked Baseball Joe, as he and his comrade stepped from the clubhouse to the green velvet turf of the Polo Grounds on the day the season opened.

"Biggest ever," replied Jim. "It looks as though all New York had turned out for the first game."

Although it was nearly an hour before the game would begin, the huge grandstands were already black with fans and the bleachers were crowded to suffocation. At every gate there were long streams of people that extended for blocks. It was evident that thousands would be turned away.

New York was baseball mad. The reports that had come up from the training camp of the superb condition of the Giants had stirred enthusiasm to the highest pitch. The papers gave columns to news and pictures of the players. On the street, in the offices, in the factories, in the subway, the one subject of conversation that

topped every other was baseball and the chances of the Giants to win the pennant.

Towering high above every other feature was the fact that Baseball Joe Matson had come back. The idol of the fans, the hero of the diamond, was himself again. There was no doubt about it. That mighty arm of his was better than ever. His work in training had been dazzling. McRae, Robbie, the players, and the baseball correspondents all agreed on that.

Not only had his pitching been that of a wizard, but his batting had been equally phenomenal. In the games that had been played as the team worked its way North he had made doubles, triples and homers galore.

The announcement that Baseball Joe would pitch this opening game against the Bostons had stirred the metropolis to the depths. Once again would they have a chance to see the wizard in action, to see him fool the opposing sluggers, and when his own turn came at bat send the ball screaming into the bleachers or over the fence.

Joe and Jim had not made five steps from the clubhouse before there was an excited murmur that swelled into a round of deafening applause that could have been heard a mile away. Men stood up and shouted until they were hoarse. Perfect strangers shook hands and clapped each other on the back. It was pandemonium.

"Matson!" "Matson!" "Joe!" "Baseball Joe!" was shouted in delirium by fifty thousand voices.

Joe felt a lump rise in his throat. These were his people. They honored him. They admired him. They were showing their belief in him. It was a glorious welcome.

"Take off your cap," ordered Jim, smiling. "You know perfectly well whom they're shouting for."

Blushing to the roots of his hair, Baseball Joe took off his cap, but the furious plaudits kept him busy removing it time and again until he reached the Giants' dugout.

"Almost seems as though they were glad to have you back with them again, Joe," laughed McRae, as he shook hands with his star pitcher.

"The president himself wouldn't have got a bigger hand," declared Robbie, his rubicund face glowing.

The Bostons, as the visiting team, had the first fifteen minutes of practice on the bases. Their work as they hurled the ball around was fast and snappy and showed that they were in the pink of condition.

Then came the Giants' turn, and the generous applause that had greeted the Bostons was multiplied tenfold as New York testified its appreciation of the splendid athletes who had so often in

past years brought the pennant to the metropolis.

Then the field was cleared and the umpires put on their masks and chest pads and dusted the plate.

"Ladies and gentlemen," roared the man who was to officiate at the plate, in a voice that a bull might envy, "the batteries for to-day's game are Maltby and Marshall for Boston and Matson and Mylert for New York. Play ball!"

The Giants scattered to their positions in the field, and Baseball Joe, drawing on his glove, walked out to the pitcher's box, to receive once more a volley of thunderous applause.

Thompson, the burly right fielder of the Bostons and its heaviest slugger, swaggered to the plate, swinging three bats. He threw away two of them and set himself in position.

"Give me a good one, Joe, and I'll murder it," he said.

"I've heard you Boston gunmen say that before," retorted Joe, grinning.

He whizzed one over that fairly smoked. Thompson swung at it and missed.

"Strike one!" called the umpire.

The next was a slow one that looked as big as a balloon when it left Joe's hand, but as small as a pea when it split the plate. Thompson nearly broke his back in a futile attempt to get at it.

"Strike two!" said the umpire.

"Something seems to have gone wrong with that murder stuff," laughed Joe, as the ball was returned to him.

Thompson's face was a brick red.

"Stow the gab and pitch," he growled.

A quick hop on the next ball lifted the ball two inches above Thompson's furious lunge.

"You're out!" called the umpire, and Thompson in high dudgeon stalked back to the bench.

"Made a monkey out of you that time, Thompson," grumbled Menken, the Boston manager. "You never came anywhere near the ball."

"Couldn't see it half the time," muttered Thompson. "That bozo's got speed to burn."

Jackson came next and tried to get Joe distracted.

"Kidding yourself that the wing's all right again, eh?" he taunted.

"Why, no," said Joe pleasantly, "not against good hitters, but plenty good enough for you."

He put over a swift inshoot that plunked into Mylert's hands for a called strike.

Figuring that Joe would not repeat, Jackson set himself for a high fast one or an outcurve. But Joe outguessed him with another in precisely the same place.

Jackson swung at it too late.

"Can't seem to hit that kind, eh?" laughed Joe.

"But there's no harm trying. I'll give you another of the same sort."

This Jackson interpreted as a bluff. No pitcher in his senses, he thought, would give away the kind of ball he intended to pitch. And just because he knew Jackson's mental processes, Joe sent another inshoot that just cut the corner of the plate.

"You're out," declared the umpire, as Jackson, bewildered, failed to offer at the ball.

"Not so bad for a bum arm," called Joe, as Jackson started back for the bench.

CHAPTER XIII

CLOUTING A HOMER

THE applause that greeted the two strike-outs in succession had barely subsided when Thornhill, the third baseman, took up his position at the plate.

"Ah, whom have we here?" remarked Joe pleasantly. "The third man of Murderers' Row."

"Get the ball near the plate and I'll show you that I belong there," grunted Thornhill.

This time Joe winged over a high fast one that the eye could scarcely follow. Thornhill struck at it after it had passed him.

"A bad habit," reproved Joe mockingly.

Thornhill flushed and set himself for the next.

This proved to be a fadeaway, the first to which Joe had resorted in the game. Again Thornhill struck and missed.

"I'm doing my best for you," said Joe mournfully. "'Tisn't my fault if you won't hit 'em."

He started as though to wind up, but stopped in the middle of his swing and snapped it over before

the batsman expected it. Thornhill lunged for it desperately, but it eluded him.

"Out!" cried the umpire.

Then from the stands and bleachers went up a roar that almost split the eardrums.

The head of the Bostons' batting list set down in order, without even a smell at the ball! There was no doubt about it. Baseball Joe had come back!

Joe had to lift his cap repeatedly as he drew off his glove and walked to the dugout.

Robbie was almost apoplectic with delight.

"That's setting them down," he chortled. "Gee, Joe, you had them eating out of your hand."

"Great pitching, old boy," commented McRae. "You're a pitching wizard, I'll say. You've got those birds where you want 'em. But be careful of your arm. After we get a lead, let the other eight men do a share of the work."

"I will," promised Joe. "Those strike-outs were for my own satisfaction as much as anything else. I wanted to convince myself that I was in full form again."

"You are," laughed McRae. "If you don't believe it, ask the Bostons."

The visiting team scattered to their positions and the Giants came to bat. It did not take long

to see that Maltby, the pitching ace of the Bostons, was also in prime condition.

Burkett, the first man up, dribbled a little one to the box and was an easy out at first. Curry did better, getting a clean hit between second and short that was returned in time to keep it from being stretched into a double. But he got no further than first, for Larry knocked a towering foul that Marshall, the Boston catcher, gobbled in without stirring from his tracks, and Curry a moment later was caught on an attempted steal of second.

In the next inning Joe set the side down in order, although, in accordance with McRae's suggestion, he did not lay special stress on strike-outs. He made Gunton hit one into the dirt just in front of the plate that Mylert got in plenty of time to field to first. McIntyre hit sharply to short, where Melton took care of it, and Thomas knocked an easy bouncer to Burkett, who stepped upon the initial bag for the third out.

Joe was the first to come to the plate in the second inning for the Giants. Ordinarily, the pitcher is a weak hitter and is placed at or near the bottom of the batting order. But whenever Joe pitched he came fourth in the "clean-up" position.

Wild clamor greeted him as he took up his stand at the rubber.

"Show 'em where you live, Joe!"

"Give the ball a ride!"

"Hit it on the seam!"

"Knock it out of the park!"

"You see what they want," said Joe to Maltby. "It hurts me worse than it does you, but I don't want to disappoint them."

"You're going to this time," returned Maltby grimly. "I'm going to pitch to you, too. No base on balls."

"Spoken like a sport," laughed Joe. "It's a treat to meet a fellow who has the courage of his convictions."

The first was wide, and Joe refused to bite. It went for a ball. The second was a bit low. Another ball.

The third, however, was a sweeping outcurve, and Joe met it full with all the force of his mighty shoulders.

Crack! It was like the report of a rifle. The ball went screaming over the heads of the fielders almost on a line for right, but rising ever higher as it went.

Thompson and Ridley had started for it at the crack of the bat. On and on went the ball, higher and higher, as though it were self-propelled and never intended to stop.

On and ever on, until it landed in the top of the bleachers, where it was hastily gobbled up by

some lucky fan who would exhibit it for years afterward as the pellet that signalized Baseball Joe's first home run of the season after his return to the game.

Joe had dropped his bat and started for first like a deer. But long before he reached the bag he saw that he had knocked a homer, and to save his wind he just jogged around the bases, coming into the home plate standing up, to be greeted with joyous acclamations by his mates and almost delirium by McRae and Robbie.

"Is he good, John?" gurgled Robbie to McRae. "Is he good, I'm askin' you?" he reiterated, with a mighty slap on McRae's back that nearly knocked the manager over.

"Good's no name for it," agreed McRae, as he recovered his balance. "But for the love of Pete, Robbie, keep that ham of yours off me. My bones can be broken like any other man's."

Maltby was flustered by that mighty clout and passed Ralston, the next man, to first. Then he tightened up and struck out McCarty on the first three balls pitched. Bowen hit into a double play that ended the inning.

The Giants had gained the jump by scoring the first run, and as the game progressed and gave every indication of developing into a pitchers' duel that run began to look as big as a mountain.

Baseball Joe had never been in better fettle.

His control was superb, his curves and hops were working right, and his change of pace bewildered his opponents. He mowed them down almost as fast as they came to the plate, and all so easily that it might be thought that he was just tossing them up in a practice game with nothing particular at stake.

What filled Joe himself with especial exultation was the perfectly comfortable feeling in that good right arm of his. Despite the verdict of the doctors and his experience in the training camp, he had been haunted by a vague fear that under the strain of a regular game it might betray some weakness, hitherto unguessed. But it had never felt better. It worked like a well-oiled piston-rod. Not a twinge! Not an ache!

Inning after inning the Bostons came to the plate merely as a matter of form, and trudged sullenly back to the bench.

Until the sixth. Then danger threatened. For the Giants suddenly developed a case of "rattles," such as comes at times to every team.

CHAPTER XIV

COOL HEADWORK

THE trouble started when Ridley, the Boston center fielder, rolled an easy one to the box, which Joe tossed to Burkett in plenty of time.

That usually reliable standby, probably through overconfidence, dropped the ball and Ridley was safe.

That error had its effect a moment later when Joe made Marshall hit to Bowen for what, under ordinary circumstances, would have been a sure double play. But Bowen booted the ball, and by the time he had recovered it Ridley was roosting on second and Marshall had reached first in safety.

Worse was to come, for Mylert, usually sure death on everything that came to him, let a third strike slip through his fingers, permitting Maltby to get to first, while his mates were each advanced a base.

Most pitchers would have been up in the air by that time with exasperation at the poor support.

But Baseball Joe lost neither his coolness nor his temper at that critical juncture.

With the bags filled and no one out, at least one run seemed certain. A sacrifice to the outfield would bring in the man on third, tying the score. A single would bring in two. A double would clear the bases. And the heaviest sluggers on the team were coming to bat!

The Boston players and their supporters in the stands were wild with excitement. Their coaches at first and third were keeping up an incessant chatter, hoping to rattle the pitcher.

"Here's where we win!"

"Send him to the showers!"

"Show these birds where they get off!"

"On your toes now and altogether!"

Amid the clamor Joe Matson was as cool as an iceberg.

In the momentarily demoralized condition of the infield he dared not trust them. The least fumble meant a run, perhaps several of them. That must be prevented at all hazards. So far he had not used his snake ball, keeping that for emergencies. Now the emergency had come.

For the next few minutes the field was in an uproar as one after the other Joe set down the Boston sluggers on strikes as fast as they came to bat.

That mysterious ball swayed and writhed, for

all the world like the snake which furnished its name. It baffled and bewildered the heavy-hitting visitors and their bats hit only the air. Their comrades on the bases implored them to bring them in. Their prayers were futile.

When the last of the three struck out there rose a chorus of cheers that dwarfed anything heard hitherto on the field that day.

Menken, the Boston manager, was foaming at the mouth.

"You dubs! You old women!" he raved. "Three on bases and not one of you could bring in a run!"

"That fellow's in league with the witches," grumbled Jackson. "He's got something on the ball I never saw before."

"That's right, boss," chimed in Thompson. "I've faced all kinds of pitching, but never anything like that."

"Go on, you sand-lotters," raged Menken. "I'm going to trade you for some recruits from a young ladies' seminary. You fellows with holes in your bats make me sick."

Maltby, for his part, was pitching a rattling good game, one that four times out of five would have won. He had few strike-outs to his credit, but he made the Giant batters hit the balls on the ground to the infield or raise easy flies to the outfielders. Up to the seventh inning he had yielded

but four hits, and none had resulted in runs except Joe's homer in the first.

Joe had had no chance to repeat. For Maltby's discretion had got the best of his sporting blood, and each time Joe came to bat Maltby passed him to first, pitching deliberately wide balls that were far out of reach.

The crowd booed him mercilessly but without effect. Maltby was pitching to win, not to please a New York crowd.

In the seventh the Giants found the use of their bats and with two successive hits, with an error sandwiched in between, managed to score another run.

Only one hit had been made off Joe, a clean single by Ridley between short and third that did no real damage, as the succeeding batters went out in order.

In the Giants' half of the eighth they again used their bats to good advantage. Melton's screamer over the second baseman's head carried him to first. Mylert sacrificed. Burkett advanced Melton to third with a single. Curry went out on a foul to the catcher, but Barrett got to first on a baby hit in front of the box that neither Maltby nor Thornhill could field in time, though Melton was held on third, Burkett being advanced to second.

With two out and three on bases Joe came to bat.

Maltby now was in the hole. If he passed Joe to first, he would force in a run. If he pitched to him, there was a chance that he might be made to hit into a double play. The crowd sensed his dilemma and hooted and howled derisively.

Maltby wound up and sent in a swift inshoot.
Crack!

Joe met it squarely on the seam!

CHAPTER XV

REGGIE BLOWS IN

THAT terrific crash spelled the doom of Boston hopes.

Just to show that he played no favorites, Baseball Joe had sent the sphere this time to left field. This time the ball, instead of going almost in a line, soared into the air as though it never intended to come down.

Jackson, the left fielder, cast one look at it and threw up his hands in despair. Then he turned and ran after the ball, hoping to retrieve it in time to hold the hit to a three-bagger.

But the ball had "home run" written all over it and rolled clear to the fence. Before Jackson could reach it, four pairs of lusty legs had clattered over the plate and the score was six to nothing in favor of the Giants.

The crowd went raving crazy, and hundreds of hats sailed through the air, their delirious owners having no better way to express their feelings.

It was all the police could do to keep the fans from sweeping down over the field then and there.

And in the Giants' dugout Joe was pounded and mauled by his rejoicing clubmates until the grinning McRae was forced to intervene.

"Don't kill him, boys," he said. "We'll need him for some other day."

Ralston made the third out on a fly to right, but nobody cared. And when the Bostons came in for their ninth all the fight was taken out of them and they went out like sheep.

One hit and no runs were all that they had been able to show for that hectic afternoon. The Giants had triumphed by an impressive score and had decorated their opponents with a neat coat of whitewash.

The moment the last man was out Joe made a dive for the clubhouse. He eluded most of the grandstanders by that maneuver, but the bleacherites were on him in thousands, and it was all that he and his mates could do to win clear to the clubhouse, where, once behind the closed door, he rested, panting but happy.

Joe's own joy was shared by all his mates, who had missed him so sadly the last season. With such a wizard in the box and at the bat, how could they lose the pennant?

It was a hilarious gathering in that clubhouse. But the hilarity extended elsewhere, all over New York, where the game was the chief topic of conversation that night; all over the United States,

where millions of fans rejoiced that their idol was himself again.

But sweeter than all the laudations heaped upon Joe was what Mabel, who had come on with Clara for the opening game, whispered to him when she had him alone in their room. Pride? The lovely young woman was fairly bursting with it.

That getting off on the right foot filled the team with a spirit that swept all before them. Jim pitched a superb game the next day and won by a score of four to one. Markwith and Merton, not to be outdone, took the next two struggles, although by closer margins. The Giants had made a clean sweep of the series.

The Dodgers came next and were forced to take the same medicine. Never had the Giants been in such fettle at the beginning of the season. Usually the Brooklyns had been a tough nut for New York to crack, but this time was an exception.

The Phillies came to the metropolis knowing that they had their work cut out for them. Rain prevented one game, and of the remaining three the Phillies took one, thus breaking the Giants' winning streak. The Giants took the other two with ease.

"Ten games out of eleven!" chuckled Larry.

"I guess we're poor."

"It's mighty encouraging, but don't crow too

soon," cautioned Joe. "We've got a running start, but it's a long way to October, and we've got to meet those birds on their own grounds and they'll be fairly honing for revenge."

They were, in fact, and when the Giants in their turn visited the Hub, the Quaker City, and the City of Churches, the going was harder. Still, out of the twelve games played on foreign grounds, the boys from New York gathered in nine.

The Western teams in the meantime were playing among themselves, and while the Pittsburghs and the Cubs had shown themselves the stronger up to date their showing was nowhere near as impressive as that made by the Giants.

Nineteen games out of twenty-three played! It looked as though the Giants, barring accidents, were going to make a runaway race of it.

That opinion was reflected in the betting odds, which more and more favored the team from the metropolis. Big odds had to be offered to get a bet down at all.

The night after their return Joe and Jim were in their room when there was a knock at the door, and Joe opened it to admit his brother-in-law.

Reggie was as resplendent as ever, immaculate and groomed to the minute.

"How are you, old chappie?" he greeted Joe. Then, discovering Jim in the background, added:

"Hello, Jim. Balmy weather you're having in little old New York, what?"

"Exceedingly balmy," Jim admitted, with a grin.

"You're as welcome as the flowers in May, old scout," said Joe warmly. "What's the news from Riverside? Everybody well?"

"Couldn't be better," replied Reggie, as he seated himself carefully and drew up one trouser leg. "Rippin', you might say. They envied me this trip, you know. But I couldn't bring them all along with me, could I, now?"

"No," agreed Joe and Jim—not without reservations.

"Just got in, I suppose?" Joe stated rather than asked.

As had quite often happened in the past, Reggie surprised his brother-in-law.

"Why, no, old top," he replied, and dusted an imaginary spot of dust from his gleaming shoes. "Fact is, I've been here for a considerable time, incognito, as one might say."

"Oh, one might, might he?" returned Joe. "Then why didn't you let us know you were here, you old renegade?"

Reggie looked mysterious.

"Suffice it to say, I had my reasons, old chap. Bally good reasons, too, don't you know?"

"They'll jolly well have to be good," replied

Joe, imitating Reggie's drawl. Something in Reggie's look made him add suspiciously: "What have you been up to, anyway? Some more of your sleuthing business?"

"The old chap must be a mind reader," said Reggie, turning to Jim, as though for confirmation. "Hit the nail directly on the head, you might say. Once a detective, always a detective, you know."

Since Reggie's excellent work in exposing the plot of Russnak, Hupft and McCarney in Riverside, Joe's respect for his brother-in-law's ability had considerably increased. So now his good-natured scoffing was blended with real interest as he inquired:

"What has aroused your suspicions this time?"

Reggie's expression of intense seriousness did not relax. Again he flicked imaginary dust from his shoes.

"The same person, you know, who aroused it before, old top," he answered.

There was no doubt now about the interest of Joe and Jim. The latter sat up with a jerk and stared. Joe stood directly in front of his brother-in-law, scowling at him.

"You mean—"

"Whom you mean, old scout," retorted Reggie imperturbably. "I've seen our old friend, Moe Russnak."

"Russnak!" cried Joe and Jim together. "Where did you see him?" asked the latter.

"Right here in jolly old New York." Reggie was filled with naïve delight at the sensation he was causing. His bland face beamed with pleasure.

"Wait a minute," cried Joe. "Let's get this thing straight. Just when and where in New York did you see—or think you saw—Moe Russnak?"

"No think about it, old chap, positively not." Reggie's tone was reproachful. "They say seein' is believin'. Fact is"—he hitched his chair forward and became more confidential—"fact is, I was on my way here from the station, you know, when I saw a couple of faces in the crowd that I recognized—jolly well couldn't forget them, you know."

Reggie betrayed a disposition to pause on this rueful note, but neither Joe nor Jim was in a mood for pauses.

CHAPTER XVI

WEAVING THE PLOT

"YOU say you saw a couple of faces you recognized," said Baseball Joe. "Mind telling us who belonged to those faces?"

"Not at all, old chap, I was coming to that." Again Reggie's tone was reproachful. "The faces, you know, belonged to two old pals of yours, Hupft and McCarney."

"Oh, those rogues!" exclaimed Joe disparagingly. "We saw them in Jacksonville. And now they're in New York, are they? They seem to hang on to the Giants like leeches."

"Quite so," agreed Reggie, imperturbed. "It was the fellah with them who caught my attention, you know. He, this person, was bulky an' sort of squat, and there was somethin' about the way he rolled his gait, don't you know, and the way he used his hands to talk with that reminded me of some one—"

"Russnak?" interrupted Joe.

Reggie nodded with the indulgent smile of a teacher at the answer of a smart pupil.

"Quite so," he said, and beamed.

His auditors digested this for a moment in thoughtful silence.

"But how can you be sure it was Russnak?" protested Joe at last. "You can't identify a person accurately by his walk or the gestures of his hands."

Reggie looked at him pityingly.

"I stopped the cab, old chap. When I saw McCarney and Hupft and this fellow that looked like Russnak I said to myself, 'Reggie, this thing will jolly well bear lookin' into, old chap.' So I stopped the cab."

He thoughtfully creased with his hands the knife edge of his trousers.

"And then?" prompted Joe.

"And then, old chappie," Reggie continued complacently, "I followed them. I followed them till the man that was with Hupft and McCarney turned around and I saw his face. He wore a heavy black beard, but I recognized him on the instant, you know."

Again there was a thoughtful silence.

"If Reggie's right—" began Joe.

"You can jolly well bet your boots I'm right," interposed Reggie.

"Then," continued Joe patiently, "this combination of Huft, McCarney and Russnak doesn't look so good for us."

"By the way, Reggie," Jim said suddenly, "if you were so all-fired sure this fellow was Russnak, why didn't you call a cop and have him jugged? He's an escaped convict for whom the authorities are looking."

For a moment Reggie's supreme assurance left him. He looked almost sheepish.

"Well, to tell the truth," he answered, "I rather fancied myself, you know, in the rôle of private detective—"

"And the police would have cramped your style," suggested Jim, with a short laugh. "Just the same—no offense to you, Reggie—I'd feel better if I knew that that fellow Russnak were safe in jail."

"I'll jolly well find out on my own account what the fellow's up to," declared Reggie.

"And in the meantime," Jim grumbled, "he'll have all the time he needs to hatch new trouble for Joe and the Giants."

Joe interrupted here with a laugh and a shrug of his broad shoulders.

"Seems to me we're making a mountain out of a mole-hill," he protested. "Even if Reggie is right about Russnak"—he ignored Reggie's gesture of indignation—"we don't know that the Jew is plotting anything against us. As a matter of fact, I should think that an escaped convict would be too busy evading the law to bother about

making trouble for others. He has troubles of his own."

"Still, if this fellow is Russnak, it seems to me it's nothing but our common duty to hand him over to the authorities," persisted Jim. "Remember not only what he did against you, but the contemptible way he robbed the Yardleys after they had played the part of good Samaritans."

"I suppose we ought to do our best to nab him," murmured Joe. "What do you say, Reggie?"

Reggie cleared his throat.

"I'm—er—I'm afraid, old chappie, it's a little too late for that," he said mildly.

Both men stared at him.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Joe. "I gathered from what you said that you had traced the rascal to his hide-out."

"I did," confessed Reggie. "But he's jolly well done a duck. Probably got on to the fact that I was trailin' him, don't you know?"

Jim groaned.

But if Russnak had "done a duck" from the place to which Reggie Varley had followed him, he had not left New York.

That same evening he was in a dingy room in a resort frequented by disreputable characters. He had gathered for a conference a select group of kindred spirits.

McCarney and Hupft were there, as well as several other ex-ballplayers, all enemies for one reason or another of Joe Matson.

There were two other men in the group, men whose loud clothes and hard faces proclaimed them members of the sporting world—or rather of the sporting underworld—gamblers of the shadiest kind.

These two were not enemies of Baseball Joe. Neither were they his friends. In fact, they recognized only one friend, and that was money! They spent their lives in pursuit of it, and in the chase all obstacles were ruthlessly ridden down.

One of these men, Chick Haney, was speaking.

"They're layin' heavy odds on the Giants," he said, stroking his heavy, clean-shaven chin. "Wise money says they're bound to run off with the pennant."

"It's a cinch," said the other gambler, Andy Glutz. "With Baseball Joe back again, with his wing working better than ever, the club can't lose. I've got a little bet placed on the Giants right now," he added.

"Vell, it's my idea you should take it off already."

It was the first time the man in the black beard had spoken. All eyes turned to him. Haney shoved a big cigar between his thin lips. His eyes narrowed, calculatingly.

"Well, old-timer," he drawled, "if you can give me one good reason why I should change my bet, you're on."

"A goot reason I can give you," asserted Russnak. "Vy you t'ink I bring you here without a reason, eh?"

"Spill it," growled McCarney impatiently. "Get to the point."

Russnak hitched up his chair.

"Listen den," he invited. "Give me your attentions for fife minutes, shentlemans, und it vill pay you. The odds you say are fife to vun on the Giants?"

Chick Haney, the man addressed, nodded indifferently.

"Apt to be higher as the season goes on," he said.

"Vell, den," said Russnak, his small eyes gleaming with greed and malice, "suppose ve could raise between us fifty t'ousan' dollars."

There was a stir of surprise among his auditors. Russnak held up a hand.

"Yust a minute, shentlemans. Let me finish. Suppose ve raise fifty t'ousan' dollars. I am not wrong in t'inking it can be done, ain't it?"

"What for?" asked Chick Haney, with an expressionless face.

"Oi, he vill not answer a simple question!" wailed the Jew. "Vell, shentlemans, here is my

idea in a nutshell. Say ve raise between us dat money. Then suppose ve bet it against the Giants and the Giants lose the pennant. Den see vat ve vin!"

"Pipe dream!" snapped Haney. "Can't be done, old-timer, not with Baseball Joe on the team."

"Not with Baseball Joe *on the team!*" repeated McCarney, with an ugly laugh.

There was silence for a moment. Then Andy Glutz spoke.

"Let's put our cards on the table," he said brusquely. "We ain't none of us so dumb that we don't get your meaning, Mr.——"

"Ruskoff," supplied the Jew softly.

"Mr. Ruskoff, then," continued Glutz. "Bluntly, what you mean is that with Baseball Joe out of the way and fifty thousand dollars put up against the Giants we stand to make a clean-up?"

"That's it," agreed Russnak, nodding his head and tapping his pudgy fingers upon the table. "Vot you say, shentlemans?"

"I say," Hupft spoke up, "that while we're getting Baseball Joe out of the way we might as well make a clean job of it and settle Jim Barclay too. That guy's always dangerous. For all we know, he might pull the Giants through, even without the help of Matson. Outside of Matson, there isn't a better twirler in the league."

"Two is as easy as vun," purred Russnak. "Come, shentlemans, vot do you say?"

The eyes of the gamblers consulted each other. Then they held an earnest, whispered conference.

"It's a go," declared Haney at length. "I ain't letting out secrets when I say that similar stunts have been pulled off before. Only"—he paused and looked directly at Russnak—"there ain't going to be any rough stuff. No croaking or anything like that. We've got to understand that now."

"Oi!" returned Russnak, "I wouldn't harm a hair of their heads."

"Then you're on," declared Haney. "I'll turn the trick. Just leave it to me. We'll give Baseball Joe and Barclay a vacation for the rest of the summer—whether they like it or not!"

CHAPTER XVII

SWINGING AROUND THE CIRCLE

"WELL, Reggie, let's dismiss Russnak for the time," said Baseball Joe to his somewhat disconcerted brother-in-law. "The best of detectives will make a slip now and then. Give me an account of what the Riverside club is doing. How are the boys shaping up? What's the outlook for the season?"

"Perfectly rippin', don't you know!" answered Reggie, rather relieved to shift the question from Moe Russnak. "They've been goin' great guns in practice, and there doesn't seem to be a weak place on the team. The town's all worked up over the boys and the park will be packed at the first game. Our season opens later than yours, you remember."

"Yes, I know," replied Joe. "We've got the jump on you there. We've already cut out a slice of twenty-three of the season's games."

"So I see," returned Reggie. "And copped nineteen of the twenty-three. Takin' all the bloomin' blighters into camp! The whole

country's talkin' about the wonderful work the Giants are doin', and especially of your and Jim's pitchin'."

"We're certainly on Easy Street just now," acquiesced Joe, "but there's no telling where we'll be, for instance, a month from now. We haven't faced the Western clubs yet, and they're tough birds to handle."

The Giants' invasion of the West called for a first stop at Cincinnati. After that they were to play Chicago and St. Louis in order, taking in Pittsburgh on their swing back home.

The tremendous pace at which the New York boys had been going had stirred the fans of the West to fever heat and the park was packed to repletion on the occasion of the first game. Probably, a full half of that vast crowd had come because Baseball Joe was announced to pitch.

Much as they admired him, they were fervent home-team fans, and hoped, of course, that the Reds would knock him out of the box.

Obliging as Joe was, he could not see his way clear to let them see him knocked out of the box. He pitched that game like the wizard he was and one little measly run was all the Reds could gather while the Giants were garnering eight.

But he did give the crowd its money's worth by knocking the most terrific homer that had ever been seen on those grounds and following it up

by a rip-snorting three-bagger. Then he had to call it a day, for the Cincinnati pitchers wouldn't let him get another sniff of the ball.

The next day Jim twirled a magnificent game and shut Cincinnati out without a run. Merton tried to repeat in the third game, but the Reds had their batting clothes on that day and got sweet revenge by the one-sided score of ten to two.

They threatened also on the last day when Markwith, who had been playing shut-out ball up to the sixth, lost control and had to be taken out of the box with the rivals three runs in the lead. Joe went in and stopped further scoring, and, with his mates taking on a new lease of life, won the game by the margin of one run.

Three out of four on the enemy's grounds was not to be sneezed at, and the Giants were in high feather as they moved on to Chicago.

That bailiwick was aflame with excitement. The Cubs were leading all the rest of the Western teams by a considerable margin. They had been strengthened by several shrewd trades during the winter before, and were playing ball of the highest class.

"Here's where you meet your Waterloo, old man," said Evans, the Cubs' manager, as he shook hands with McRae in friendly fashion. "You can't stop my boys, the way they're going. I hate to say it, but you're our meat."

"No use playing the game then, I suppose, since you've got it won in advance," laughed McRae.

"Oh, we can't cheat the crowd," returned Evans, chuckling. "They've paid to see you slaughtered, and slaughtered you'll have to be. But we'll do it as mercifully as possible."

"Which is that boy Bassett?" asked Joe of Jim, as he started in to warm up. "The slugger you were telling me about in the winter?"

"There he is," replied Jim, pointing to a tall, powerfully built athlete who was knocking out flies to the fielders. "He's a terror at the bat. Has a swelled head, all right, but he's got the goods. I'm looking to you to make a joke of him to-day, Joe."

"If he doesn't make a joke of me," laughed Joe.

"You've just got to down him," said Jim. "The crowd is thinking of nothing else but the duel between you two. It will be a case of when Greek meets Greek."

Joe knew this to be true, for on the train he had read the Chicago papers, which had dwelt especially on the test between Baseball Joe and the man who the year before had been the batting champion of the league.

The practice was over, the gong rang, and the Giants, as visitors, went first to bat.

There was little nourishment for them in that

inning. Burkett went out on a long fly to left field. Curry got to first on a scratch single but was out trying to steal second. Barrett put up a Texas leaguer that was caught by the second baseman after a long run toward center field.

Still they were getting to Alger, even if ineffectively. Even that slight comfort was denied the Cubs when they went in for their half. Joe struck out Halley in short order, caught Hannigan out on a pop fly to the box and mowed down Tench on three pitched balls.

In the second inning for the Giants Joe was passed to first. Ralston popped up a towering foul to the catcher. On the next pitch Joe stole second. But there he was left, for McCarty struck out and Bowen grounded to the first baseman, who stepped on the bag for the out.

Bassett was the first man up for the Cubs. He came to the plate, swaggering, with a confident grin on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

SQUELCHING A BRAGGART

BASEBALL JOE looked his adversary over coolly. Bassett stared at Joe arrogantly.

"Whatever you do, don't pass me to first," begged Bassett.

"Certainly not," replied Joe politely. "I do that only to dangerous hitters."

He whipped over a ball that fairly smoked, so swift that Bassett only struck at it after it had passed him.

"Strike one!" called the umpire.

The next was a drop that dipped sharply at the plate. Bassett lunged and missed it by inches.

"Left your spectacles at home?" queried Joe.

"Can the chatter," cried Bassett furiously.

Then Joe zipped over his snake ball. Bassett watched it, fascinated and appalled. He did not even offer at it, though it split the plate.

"You're out!" cried the umpire.

Bassett glared at Joe and threw his bat to the ground. It was poor sportsmanship, and even the Chicago crowd hissed.

Arlen went out on a bounder to second and Burkett caught Brown's high foul close to the Giants' dugout.

Both teams now had settled down for a hard struggle. The Giants did not have so much to do, because Joe was carrying the greater part of the burden.

Alger was being hit rather freely, but he was getting magnificent support. Several hard clouts that would ordinarily have been hits were caught after long runs by the outfielders. At times, when there were one or two Giants on the bases, Alger put on steam and ended the inning without a score.

"Gee, Joe, but I'm tickled to death at the way you struck out Bassett," chuckled Jim, as they sat on the bench during one of the Giants' halves. "It did me good to see that blowhard taken down."

Joe smiled.

"He sure was sore, wasn't he?" he replied. "I might have let him hit the ball and take a fielder's chance on him if he hadn't been so chesty."

"Don't do it," implored Jim. "Strike him out if you can every time he comes to the bat."

"That's a pretty big order for a batsman of his caliber," replied Joe. "Sooner or later he's likely to nick me. But I'll do my best."

The next time Bassett came to bat he was not

a bit subdued. He had had time to recover some of his bountiful store of self-confidence.

"Here's where I get even," he growled, as he dug his toes into the dirt.,

"No harm in trying," replied Joe pleasantly.

He threw a lazy, twisting teaser that seemed easy enough to hit as it drifted toward the plate; but when Bassett struck savagely at the ball it was not there.

"Rather late in starting to get me, aren't you?" asked Joe, grinning.

A swift inshoot followed for another strike.

"Seems as though I can't please you, no matter how hard I try," complained Joe.

Bassett spluttered something, but he was so choked with wrath that his words could not be distinguished.

A fadeaway dropped into Mylert's mitt.

"You're out!" cried the umpire, and a mingled groan and cheer went up from the enormous crowd. Groan because of their favorite's showing, cheer because of the marvelous pitching that made a monkey out of their greatest batsman. What kind of wizardry was this, anyway?

Up to the seventh inning the tie continued. Then the Giants got to Alger and by consecutive batting knocked out a couple of runs.

But in their half the Cubs clawed their way to a tie.

Brown, the first man up, knocked the ball along the third base line. It looked as though it were going to go foul, and Bowen waited too long before he picked it up. Brown by fast running had got to the initial bag. Joe set Sinton down on strikes. Alger also was the victim of a strike-out. Then Halley hit a grounder to Barrett that struck a stone just as Larry had set himself for it and it bounded over his head.

Brown was legging it to second. He turned the bag and made for third. Curry came in fast from right to retrieve the ball and hurled it to third to catch Brown. The throw was swift, but went high over Bowen's head, and before it could be got back in the diamond both men had scored.

Joe made Hannigan hit to the box and easily got the ball down to first for the third out. But the score had been tied. The unearned runs counted for just as much as those secured by the Giants' heavy batting.

It was tough luck, but part of the game.

The Giants could do nothing in their half of the eighth and the Cubs were in the same box.

Joe so far had come three times to bat but every time Alger had passed him to first. He was taking no chances with that keen eye and mighty arm.

Bassett on his third time up had repeated his failure of the first two times. Joe had him completely buffaloed. Bassett had hit under the ball,

over it, all around it, but had never laid ash upon it. Even the poor consolation of a foul was denied him. Joe was simply untouchable as far as he was concerned.

This was the more exasperating to the braggart because Baseball Joe, mindful of his arm, had been more tolerant with the rest of the Cubs. He had made them hit into the dirt or knock up fungo hits to the outfielders. But at least most of them had hit the ball, if only for outs. Bassett, the mighty slugger, had not even come near it. And that after all the boasting of what he was going to do to Baseball Joe! It was humiliating, maddening.

In the Giants' half of the ninth Curry poled out a mighty hit to right that looked safe, but a superb run by Tench gathered it in. Larry made a clean hit over second for a base, but was out in trying to stretch it to a two-bagger.

With two out Joe came to the plate. He was greeted with a tumult of cheers that showed the Chicago crowd's sportsmanship. They had seen a wonderful exhibition of pitching and wanted to acknowledge it.

But that was not all the cheering meant. It might be good generalship not to give Joe a chance to hit the ball, but sporting blood rebelled at it. It was a confession of cowardice. Joe had been a sport in pitching directly to Bassett. It

made the Chicago rooters feel a little cheap to see by contrast the faint-heartedness of Alger.

A chorus of shouts swept over the diamond.

"Pitch to him!"

"Give him a chance at the ball!"

"He pitched to Bassett!"

"Aw, gwan, be a sport!"

"Seems to be unanimous," remarked Joe to Alger. "How about it? Strike me out."

"I'm doing this pitching," growled Alger.

He motioned to his catcher and deliberately threw the ball wide.

"Ball one," called the umpire.

A tumult of boos and catcalls arose.

Imperturbed, Alger threw another ball far away from the plate.

"Good work, old lady," taunted Joe.

Whether it was that the taunt got under Alger's skin or he lost control, Joe did not know. But the next ball came within reach of his bat.

The next instant the ball started shrieking on its way to the outfield!

CHAPTER XIX

A FIGHT WITH THUGS

A TREMENDOUS roar rose from the crowd as they watched the pellet soaring up into the azure of the sky, seeming to gather strength and speed as it went.

Far over the fielders' heads it sailed, and then in a graceful curve cleared the fence and bounded through a window on the other side of the street.

Amid a pendemonium of cheers, Joe trotted around the bases and touched the plate while the Chicago players remained glum and silent and Joe's clubmates went wild with joy. The score now was three to two with the Giants in the van.

The Chicagos came up for their last chance at bat determined to do or die. They died! For Joe, taking no chances now, called all his uncanny skill into action and let down Hannigan and Tench with strike-outs.

Bassett was the third man up, and the roars of encouragement that greeted him died down into a tense silence as he faced the pitcher who had three times taken his measure.

"Well, what will you have this time?" asked Joe. "No trouble to show goods."

"Shut up and pitch," snarled Bassett.

Joe whizzed one over that seemed about breast high, but that, just as Bassett lunged at it, leaped up and shot into Mylert's palms.

"Strike one!" called the umpire.

"Whatever got into the ball to act that way?" remarked Joe, in simulated surprise.

"Cut out the wise cracks," fumed Bassett, his face a fiery red.

The next was a deceptive drop that Bassett missed by two inches.

Then the "snake" ball undulated up to the plate and Bassett's despairing swing missed it.

"You're out!" shouted the umpire, and the game was over. The Giants had triumphed by the score of three to two in one of the most thrilling games ever seen in the Windy City.

The victory was a welcome one to the visitors and doubly, trebly welcome because a braggart had been let down a peg. Great batsman as Bassett undoubtedly was, he had made scores of enemies all over the circuit by his offensive boasting. Even his own team was tired of it and shed few tears, though they hated to lose the game.

Jim turned in another victory the next day, but on the third the worm turned upon Brady and gave him a terrific beating that to some extent salved

its wounds. The Giants, however, took the fourth and left Chicago with three out of four tucked under their belts.

They were less fortunate in St. Louis, where the Cardinals held them to an even break. In Pittsburgh they played only two games, owing to bad weather, one going to each team.

Nine victories out of fourteen games played on foreign fields was going some, and the impression deepened that the Giants had a cinch on the flag. McRae himself, habitually cautious as he was, went around with a beatific smile on his face. With Joe and Jim in the condition they were, he didn't see how he could lose.

Others thought so, too. Among them, Moe Russnak!

One day, shortly after their return to New York, Joe and Jim had taken a taxi to call upon a friend a short distance from the city.

A car whizzed past them, closely followed by another.

"Breaking all the speed laws," Jim remarked. "Next appearance on the horizon will probably be a motorcycle cop."

"Perhaps they're bootleggers on the run," suggested Joe. "Hello, what's this?"

His exclamation was prompted by seeing that the two autos in question had turned and drawn up directly across the quiet country road, which

was off the main highway and little traveled.

There was something ominous about the action that warned Joe of danger.

"Stop!" he cried to the driver. "Turn your cab around! Get out of this quick!"

But it was too late. The driver stopped, but he was almost on top of the cars. He had no time to turn around, for instantly a stream of men poured from the two cars and surrounded the taxicab. Most of the men were armed.

Joe leaped from the cab, knocked one man down with a flying tackle, clipped another a crashing blow in the jaw. Some one put out a foot and tripped him. He felt the breath almost jolted from his body as he measured his length upon the ground.

He was up in a second, fighting with both hands. He caught a glimpse of Jim, the center of another furious struggle. Good old Jim! He was fighting like a tiger. Perhaps they could make it after all.

Something swung poised for a moment above Joe's head. The blackjack descended, and the light went out for Joe. He sank into a soul-sickening blackness filled with pain.

When Baseball Joe came back to consciousness he found that he was lying on something hard.

His thoughts were a hopeless tangle. They whirled about in his aching head in a maddening

dance. Nothing made sense. The more he tried to concentrate the more hopeless became the tangle.

He closed his eyes in despair and tried not to think at all. But he soon found that it was harder to try not to think than to think. What was the use?

An impatient movement brought another stab of pain.

There came to him a vague memory of something lifted above his head, something that he had tried without success to dodge.

Slowly, painfully that scene came back to him—the crowd of men surrounding the taxi, his effort to defend himself, Jim fighting desperately not far from him, and then that blow on the head that had put him, Joe, definitely out of the running.

He lay very still, fearing that if he moved his head would begin to whirl again.

So that was it! Crooks were at work again. Joe was at no loss for a motive. As a matter of fact, there were two from which to choose.

The abduction might have been planned and accomplished by a personal enemy of Jim Barclay and himself. Or, which he thought more likely, it was the work of gamblers who hoped to make a pile of money by crippling the Giants.

"In either case the result will be the same to McRae and Robbie," thought Joe bitterly.

"Here's where all my hopes for the season go flooey."

The fact that they had taken Jim as well as himself inclined him to think it was the work of gamblers rather than personal enemies, crooks who saw in the defeat of the Giants a chance to make a fortune.

Without him, Joe, the Giants would be sorely beset, but they might still have a chance to come in first in the home stretch. Jim, always good, was improving right along, and even McRae's second-string pitchers were not to be sneezed at by opposing teams.

But with both himself and Jim gone! Joe groaned in anguish of spirit.

But had Jim been captured? Joe realized suddenly that he was by no means sure of this. The last he had seen of Jim he was in the midst of a furious scrimmage. Had he by some miracle won his freedom?

Joe decided to try to find this out at once. First of all, it was necessary to find just what he was lying on and how securely his captors had bound him.

A sound had been beating against his consciousness for some time. It was the gentle slap, slap of water, much water, against the side of a boat. Also, now that he listened, he heard quite plainly the putt-putt of a motor.

"So that's it!" he muttered. "I'm a prisoner aboard a motorboat of some sort! Bound for where?"

Joe did not have to lift his hands to assure himself that they were bound. The tight pressure about his wrists was ample evidence. He was rather surprised, however, upon moving his feet to find that they were free.

"So much to the good, anyway," he comforted himself.

Remembering how painful the slightest motion had been before, Joe took a firm grip on himself and sat up. His head throbbed horribly. A wave of nausea swept over him. He became aware of a strange, sickish-sweet smell in the place. The air was thick with the fumes of some drug, ether or chloroform. He sat very still, fighting off the flood of sickness.

"So it wasn't only the crack on the head that made me groggy," he soliloquized. "I've been drugged as well. Probably been asleep in this hole for hours."

As he sat there struggling to coördinate his thoughts, to clear his brain of the numbing influence of the drug, another memory struck him with the force of a blow.

"We were to leave the city to-night. It must be long past train time. What did McRae think when we failed to turn up?"

This question was followed by a swift hope. McRae would investigate, of course. If he should strike the trail of the kidnaping gang soon enough, there was the possibility of a speedy rescue.

Some sound other than the beat of the engine and the slap of the water against the side of the boat arrested him. It was the steady, rhythmic sound of breathing, the heavy, unnatural breathing of artificially induced slumber.

Joe listened intently, holding his own breath. There could be no doubt of it. Some one was asleep quite close to him. Was it Jim? Was it a guard, perhaps, who had been assigned to watch him and had himself succumbed to sleep?

Joe determined to solve the problem at once.

He swung his leg over the edge of the bunk.

"They've at least left me a chance to move about," he thought to himself, "though what good that will do me remains to be seen."

The blackness was thick enough to cut. Joe stubbed his toe brutally over some unseen object and strangled an exclamation.

He missed something and stood still, listening for it. The heavy, labored breathing had stopped.

Baseball Joe would have given a large slice of his worldly goods for the use of his eyes at this moment.

"Somebody is in here with me," he called.

"Don't be shy. Speak up! Who is it, friend or foe?"

His voice sounded disconcertingly loud in the stillness. The narrow walls of the cabin seemed to magnify it and fling it back at him.

Then there came another sound. He was sure of it this time. It was a sigh, then a sputtering cough. Again Joe wheeled, instinctively raising his bound hands.

"Now," he cried, "tell me who you are or—"

A voice answered him. It seemed at the same time far away and yet near at hand. Joe could not understand it.

He listened, and the voice came again. It was raised a little now, but still it could scarcely be heard, for the wind was rising and the water slapping smartly against the side of the boat.

"That you, Joe, old man?"

"Jim!"

CHAPTER XX

IN DESPERATE FLIGHT

HIS heart beating fast, Baseball Joe groped his way in the direction of the voice. It was his fellow pitcher who had spoken. But where was he?

"Here, old boy!" Jim's voice again guided him. He was closer to it now. "Here, on the other side of the partition."

Joe's bound hands, stretched in front of him, came in contact with a wall.

Jim spoke again, and Joe knew by the sound of the voice that he had come as near to his brother-in-law as he could. Still he wondered how he could hear so clearly through the partition.

Jim's next sentence explained the mystery.

"Seems to be a knothole here in the wood. Make's a little speaking tube. Feel along until you come to it."

Joe complied and moved his fingers till he found a rough, tiny aperture. He put his lips to this.

"Can you hear me better now, Jim?" he asked.

"Plainly," was the reply. "I'm just beginning

to remember things, Joe. Pretty dizzy in the head. Sick, too! Do you smell anything queer in the place?"

"It's ether, I think," replied Joe. "We've been doped, Jim, and shanghaied. We're on some sort of boat bound for land knows where."

"That's sweet news!" exclaimed Jim bitterly. "Wonder whom we're to thank for this night's work."

"We've plenty of enemies," returned Joe. "It's a waste of time trying to think who's responsible. The appalling fact is that we're here—"

"Joel!" Jim's whisper was urgent. "I think I hear some one. Better go back and lie down."

The advice was good, but it was easier to give than to follow.

Joe had no idea as to the location of the bunk. Now he could only stumble blindly forward, hoping he could reach it before any one entered the cabin.

But luck was not with him. A key grated in the lock of the door, the door swung inward, and a man entered, carrying a lantern.

By the light Joe saw the bunk clearly enough. But now it was too late to reach it without being discovered. So he remained standing where he was.

With curiosity and mounting anger he looked at the man with the lantern.

There was something familiar in the figure even before Joe saw his face, and when he did see it, in spite of the heavy black beard, Joe recognized the fellow immediately.

"Moe Russnak!" he said slowly. "So it is you."

"You expect me, yes?" asked the Jew, looking toward him with his piggish eyes. "Vell, my fine baseball player, how is it by you, eh?"

Joe did not answer. He was outwardly calm, as he gave his enemy a look that would have blistered any one less thick-skinned. Inwardly he was not so calm.

"Sit down, vy don't you?" Russnak rubbed his hands together in a way he had when particularly pleased with the success of one of his vile schemes. "You have a long trip ahead of you. I have a kind heart. I vish you to be comfortable."

Joe sat down on his bunk, not at the Jew's invitation, but because a sudden sharp roll of the boat pitched him there.

Russnak slid along the floor and collided with the wall. The lantern was nearly jerked from his hand.

"Oi, such a storm! Such a vind! If this keeps up, ve should find ourselves at the bottom of the ocean."

"That's where you and your dirty gang belong," replied Joe.

"You forget, my young friend, that if we go to the bottom of the ocean we all go together. You forget that, yes?"

"I forget nothing, Moe Russnak," Joe retorted. "Especially, I don't forget that the stunt you're pulling off now will give you a still longer prison term when you're handed over to the police."

Joe had the satisfaction of seeing Moe Russnak wince before his face settled into its sly mask again.

"They will have to catch me first, yes?" he responded. "Meantime it is Baseball Joe who is a prisoner, not Moe Russnak."

With his eye Joe measured the distance to the door of the cabin. He was sure that the Jew had not locked it when he had entered.

A swift dash, a wrench of the doorknob!

Russnak saw the glance and as quickly translated the thought in Joe's mind.

"I would not try it, no," said the Jew softly. "Beyond the door are desperate men. When they shoot they hit what they shoot at."

"What are you up to, anyway, you jailbird?" snapped Joe. "Just what is your dirty game?"

The other's eyes narrowed craftily.

"Maybe it is revenge," he said, rubbing his hands together, "and maybe it is something else."

He turned abruptly toward the door. Once more Joe's voice arrested him.

"How long am I to be kept prisoner on this boat?"

Russnak shrugged his shoulders and smiled evilly.

"Maybe a month, two, three. How do I know? Go to sleep now and dream fine dreams. See how nice I am to you. I told you I had a kind heart."

"If I had my hands free I'd tear that black heart from your body!" cried Joe, his eyes blazing. "I'd—"

The door slammed. Russnak had gone.

Joe heard the key turn in the lock. He was alone again in the dark, a rolling dark filled with noises of the storm.

For a long time he worked at the cords about his wrists. They had been tied with diabolical cleverness. Under his manipulation they did not even loosen.

"Whoever tied these knew his business," he admitted finally. "Only a magician could get out of them."

He heard voices on the other side of the partition, and guessed rightly that Russnak had paid his other captive a visit to gloat over him.

Then there was nothing but the shrill howl of the wind and the angry buffeting of the waves as the boat labored through a heavy sea.

What rest Baseball Joe had that night he got in snatches, and it was haunted by visions of McRae and Robbie and the probable discomfiture of the Giants in the absence of Jim Barclay and himself.

He would wake from dreams like these to find himself in a cold sweat, his bound hands clenched.

"Jim and I will have to get out of this some way," he told himself desperately. "When we do we'll make Moe Russnak pay!"

And Mabel! Joe knew the agony of soul she would endure when the news of his disappearance should be made public. McRae, good old Mac, would try to keep it from her as long as he could, but it must come out at last.

Clara would be suffering the same anguish over Jim. And his mother! Her heart was none too strong, and this blow might be too much for her. And his father!

But that way madness lay, and Joe Matson summoned all his self-control to his aid. He must keep his head cool, his nerves steady.

Dawn came at last and with it fairer weather. Joe awoke from a spasmodic doze to find that the boat was riding easily.

Joe swung his legs over the side of the bunk and put his hands to his aching head. The day-

light only served to show him more fully the hopelessness of his situation.

He heard a sound that might be the scratching of mice. But after listening for a minute he decided that it was too steady and persistent for that.

He located the noise near the partition which separated his "cell" from Jim's. His brother-in-law was trying to signal to him!

He went swiftly across the cabin and knelt near the knot-hole.

"That you, Jim?" he whispered cautiously.

"Nobody else," returned Jim. "How do you feel this morning, old man?"

"Worse than I did last night, if possible," replied Joe. Then in a carefully lowered tone he added: "Did Russnak pay you a visit last night?"

"Was that fellow with the pig eyes and the beard Russnak?" asked Jim, with interest.

"It sure was," replied Joe grimly. "That black beard is the thinnest sort of disguise to any one who has known the Jew intimately, as I have, worse luck!"

"Then I bet McCarney and Hupft are in on this, too," declared Jim.

"Likely enough," agreed Joe. "It would be just their meat. But the thing we're most concerned with just now is not how we got into this scrape but how we are going to get out of it."

"Sure thing," said Jim. "If you've thought of any way I'd be glad to have you spill it."

"I've only one suggestion just now," observed Joe. "That is that we don't start any rough stuff until we've had a chance to look about and find just how the cards are stacked against us. If we seem resigned, that may put them off their guard and give us the chance we're looking for."

"I see the point, but it's going to be a large order, Joe. I was never farther from resignation than I am at this minute."

"Let's try it, anyway," insisted Joe, "and see how it will work."

There were footsteps in the corridor outside. Joe got to his feet and moved over to the port-hole where he pretended to be looking out as the key turned raspingly in the door.

A man entered, carrying a tray. Joe studied the newcomer with interest.

The man was an unprepossessing individual, long and lean, with a catlike tread and with fore-arms that were out of all proportion to the rest of him. His face was brutish. He had narrow, slanting eyes, low forehead and a nose that was like a bird's beak.

He shot a sullen look at Joe as he placed the tray on the table.

"Well, it's something," remarked Joe experi-

mentally, "to find that they don't intend to starve me to death."

"If you can eat them vittles," the man answered dispassionately, "you're welcome to them."

He turned and went out.

"Doesn't sound very promising," said Joe to himself, as he approached the tray and regarded the contents curiously.

Heavy biscuits, scorched bacon, eggs fried until they were like leather, bitter coffee!

It was plain that Russnak did not intend to treat his prisoners any too well.

Joe was wondering how he was going to eat even this dubious fare with his hands bound, when the long, lean man entered the cabin again. He carried a knife, but not with murderous intent, as Joe at first half suspected.

"Boss sent me back to cut them ropes from your wrists," the man explained.

"Very kind of him," remarked Joe, as he held out his hands.

The sarcasm showing in his tone made the man glance at Joe suspiciously.

"If I was you, I wouldn't try any funny business," he growled.

"Is that a message from the boss, too?" asked Joe.

"It's from me, Mister, for what it's worth,"

said the fellow sullenly. "Don't make no difference to me whether you take it or leave it."

"Just a friendly warning, I suppose," remarked Joe.

"If you got any friends on this boat, I ain't seen 'em yet," was the reply.

"I'll bet there's more truth than poetry in that," murmured Joe to himself, as he was left alone. "That fellow's a cheerful type. A regular bit of sunshine. He encourages me."

He ate the wretched food on the tray as a matter of duty rather than liking. Still, he was ravenously hungry. For the first time he realized that he had had no supper on the preceding night. He had not broken his fast since noon of the day before.

It was at least something to have his hands free. It made him feel more like a man again, capable of meeting and vanquishing a dozen Russnaks.

"I'll beat them yet," he muttered. "This is going to be a battle of wits, and I'll fool them at their own game."

CHAPTER XXI

A GLEAM OF HOPE

FOR some time it seemed as though Baseball Joe's confidence in his ability to get the better of the Jew had been misplaced.

Miserable days passed, days in which Joe and Jim were shut up in their respective cubbyholes, as completely cut off from the world as though they had been lodged in a building of stone behind barred windows.

Nothing broke the monotony of those days except the conversations between the prisoners and the arrival of the guard at stated intervals with the food that was necessary to keep them from starvation. It did that and nothing more. Joe and Jim ate the wretched food, not because they liked it, but because it was necessary to keep up their strength.

Joe still adhered to his policy of apparent resignation, in order to lull his captors into a false sense of security. If they could once become convinced that he was taking his capture philosophically and making the best of a bad bargain, they

might so far relax their vigilance that he and Jim would have a chance to make their escape.

He was tortured constantly by thoughts of his wife and his parents. He imagined the Giants losing game after game, the boys in a slump, McRae in despair.

On the third day the elongated sailor came in and, with his usual surly expression, deposited the tray on the table. Stringy cornbeef and cabbage, with lukewarm tea.

To Joe's surprise the sailor spoke.

"The boss says you're to have ship's liberty to-day," he announced.

"I suppose it means I'm to be allowed on deck," Joe said, trying to appear uninterested.

"Yeah," replied the man. "You and the fellow in the next cabin."

Half an hour later Joe and Jim met on deck. They pretended to be surprised and overjoyed at their meeting, as though they now learned of each other's presence on board for the first time.

They were not accompanied by guards. Their hands were unbound. They were free apparently to go where they would and do as they pleased.

They stood side by side at the rail, drinking in the welcome draughts of salt air. They found themselves on a dingy motor yacht, a craft much in need of repairs.

The weather was perfect. A golden sun flamed

overhead, finding its reflection in the dazzling water. The sky was blue, the clouds fleecy and light. Nowhere was land to be seen.

"What do you make of it, Joe?" asked Jim, in a low voice.

"Probably Russnak is sure that we can't escape and doesn't want us to get sick on his hands from confinement."

"Any idea where we are?" asked Jim, looking around to make sure he was not overheard.

"Not the least," was the reply, "except, from the warmth of the air, we seem to be pretty far South."

"We're far enough from home, anyway," muttered Jim gloomily. "And without a chance, apparently of getting off this motor yacht," he added.

Out of the corner of his eye Joe saw a familiar and hated figure detach itself from a knot of men and start toward them along the deck.

"Be careful," he warned Jim. "Here comes Russnak."

The two young men turned about to face the Jew. Their glances measured him contemptuously.

Russnak began without preamble.

"I let you come on deck because dere is no longer a chance you get away," he began.

"You're a dead game sport to take such a risk," replied Joe sarcastically.

"Maybe." The Jew shrugged his shoulders. "But I will tell you dat if you make any breaks you will be sorry. Every man on dis boat has a gun and he should use it if you dry to escape. If you vant to die, all right. But I t'ink you still have some sense, ain't it?"

Joe and Jim digested this in silence for a while.

"We've been several days on this boat," said Joe at last. "Perhaps you will tell where we are headed."

Again Russnak shrugged his shoulders. The gesture intimated that their ultimate destination held no interest for him.

"How I know?" he protested. "I ain't de captain. Maybe it is de West Indies, maybe South America. Anyway," he added with his hateful grin, "it will be far enough away so dat you can't swim back to de United States, yes? And if you should jump overboard, de sharks will get you."

"West Indies! South America!" groaned Jim, when Russnak had sidled away, smirking and rubbing his hands. "It's worse than I feared, Joe. Our goose is cooked, all right, and the Giants', too."

"The folks will think we're dead," declared Joe, writhing internally. "I shouldn't care so much if

we could get word to them telling them we're alive."

Day followed uneventful day until three weeks had passed, and still the motor yacht, *Clarabel*, rode smiling waters and worked her way serenely toward the tropics. She was just sauntering along, killing time without any apparent destination.

More than once land came into view. Joe and Jim watched it eagerly, only to see it fade into the distance as the *Clarabel* altered her course.

"I don't believe that that scoundrel means to put into any port," growled Jim.

"Not if he can help it," agreed Joe. "He stands too much chance of losing us. Just the same," he added, frowning at the endless expanse of waters, "the next time we come in sight of land I've a good mind to make a break for it. We may get shot or be eaten up by sharks. Then again, we'd have a bare chance of winning to shore."

"Nothing could be worse than staying where we are," declared Jim.

Watching their chances when no one was looking, Joe and Jim had managed to pick up several metal objects on the deck of the *Clarabel*—iron bolts, nuts, spikes and other odds and ends—that they secreted in their clothes with a vague hope that they might come in good some day.

"Sorry enough weapons," commented Joe, "but they may do service in a pinch. Who knows?"

Russnak, secure in his knowledge that he had a vicious gang to back him up, seemed to be relaxing his vigilance. Aside from the fact that there was generally some one in the background with a suggestively inquiring gaze and a hand that had acquired a habit of traveling quickly toward a sinister bulge in the hip pocket, the two baseball pitchers might have been guests instead of prisoners. Nevertheless, there was a tension in the air of which the captives were never for a moment unconscious.

One day a group of specks on the horizon caught Joe's attention.

"Land, Jim," he said in a low voice. "We look to be headed directly toward those islands. If we pass close enough—"

"We'll do a duck," finished Jim.

The islands became larger, their outlines more distinct against the brilliant blue of the sky.

"Maybe Russnak is going to put into port," Jim suggested. "Provisions or water running low, perhaps."

"Let's hope so," returned Joe. A hand in his pocket fingered the missiles he had picked up on deck.

Closer came the islands. Joe would have

judged them only a mile away if he had not known how deceptive are distances on the water.

Suddenly he stiffened.

"Look there, Jim!" he exclaimed. "Look there!"

Around one of the islands came a boat.

It was a small motorboat, but was moving with amazing speed.

It cut the water swiftly, making directly toward the *Clarabel*.

Russnak had seen it, too. Perhaps he conjectured that it was a police boat that had got wind of the kidnaping. He ran about the deck, shouting a dozen conflicting orders to the bewildered crew.

Joe did not hesitate. Here was the chance he and Jim had been looking for.

He made a megaphone of his hands and shouted with all the strength of his lungs.

"Help! Help! To the rescue!"

CHAPTER XXII

BEWILDERMENT

ON the night that Baseball Joe and Jim Barclay had been kidnaped, the Giants had been scheduled to leave for Boston on the eleven o'clock train.

As the time approached for leaving, McRae grew uneasy and he consulted his watch frequently. It was not like Joe and Jim to be late on occasions like this.

When, fifteen minutes before train time, they still had failed to appear, McRae himself telephoned to their hotel.

When he was told that both ballplayers had left the hotel early that afternoon and had not been seen since by the management, his uneasiness became something very like consternation.

What had happened to Joe and Jim? What mystery clothed their disappearance? What was he, McRae, to do about it?

He had only a few minutes in which to decide. As a result of his decision he sent the team on ahead in charge of the assistant manager while he

stayed behind to look up the missing players.

"I'll follow on to-morrow," he told the worried Robbie, "and I'll have those two lads with me or know the reason why. In the meantime, don't let the other boys think that there's anything out of the way. I don't want them to get rattled."

Many different explanations of the strange absence flashed through McRae's mind.

They had gone out and their car had broken down, perhaps, leaving them stranded in some lonely place.

"But then they could have 'phoned," he said to himself. "Very few places where you can't find a 'phone these days. Besides, they wouldn't have been likely to go far, knowing that we expected to leave town to-night."

From the station he went straight to the boys' hotel. There he found a porter who had seen Joe and Jim get into the taxi.

Yes, the porter knew the driver of the cab. He also, as luck would have it, had noticed the number of the taxi and remembered it.

But here McRae's luck ended.

He traced the taxi and its fare to a service station on the outskirts of the city where the driver had stopped for gas. From that point he lost all track of it.

Back at his own home, he called up hospitals and transit lines to inquire about accidents.

Nothing had occurred that bore the slightest relation to Joe and Jim.

He got quietly in touch with close friends of his on the detective force. To them he stated the facts, impressing on them that he did not want any publicity. They promised an immediate search.

McRae tried to reassure himself that morning would bring an explanation. But his heart was full of grim foreboding.

Were the hopes of the Giants doomed once more to frustration? Was the season, so brilliantly begun, to end in failure? More than all, had calamity come upon the two pitchers for whom he had a real and deep affection?

Days of deep anxiety passed without bringing a gleam of light. The detective force of the city was working secretly and desperately.

Meanwhile, the Giants were losing game after game! The lead they had established over their rivals was melting steadily away, for the unexplained absence of their stars had demoralized the team.

McRae rallied them, scolded them, encouraged them, wheedled them, fumed at them. But the team was like a machine that had lost its driving wheel. The boys did their best and occasionally showed traces of their real form, but could not get going. Their opponents found them "easy

meat." Before long they were losing three games out of four.

Then something happened. The taxi driver turned up with his story. Following the assault, he had been taken prisoner and held in a lonely place under the guard of armed men. At the end of a week he had been released with dire threatenings of what would happen to him if he told the facts.

But he was an honest and fearless man and he told them nevertheless. But he knew little except about the attack. He knew nothing of where the captives had been taken. But he had gathered—and this was much—that no physical harm was intended to them. They were simply to be kept out of the way.

McRae sensed the plot at once. It was a gamblers' scheme to defeat the Giants by robbing them of their main reliances. And it would be a successful plot, unless the missing men were found speedily!

Now McRae threw off the cloak of secrecy and gave the full story to the world so that all could join in the search. The sensation caused was prodigious. The newspapers were full of it. The whole country resolved itself into a detective force to find the missing players. But weeks passed without a clew, and all this time the Giants were going down. The team was shot to pieces. They

lost the lead and the other teams climbed all over them. Soon the Chicagos, the Pittsburghs, and the Reds were away out in front.

The agony in the Matson home cannot be described. Mabel and Clara were almost out of their minds with grief and apprehension.

McRae, in a long and kind letter, had reassured them as much as he had been able by pointing out that Joe and Jim were probably safe as far as their lives were concerned and that they would be released unharmed as soon as the success of the gamblers' plot was assured.

In the presence of Mr. and Mrs. Matson, who were plunged in grief, the girls bravely tried to dissemble their fears. They spoke of the time when Joe and Jim should return as though that longed-for event were certain to happen shortly. It was a gallant pretense, but one which they abandoned in the privacy of their own rooms. There they gave full vent to their tears and fears.

The morrows came and went. But Joe and Jim did not come!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CHASE

ON the *Clarabel* Jim Barclay added his voice to Baseball Joe's, at the same time waving his arms wildly.

The call was evidently heard and its purport recognized by those on the motorboat. There were answering waves, and the boat came on swiftly.

Russnak stopped running around and glared at the captives, his face convulsed with rage.

"Lock up those men!" he shouted. "Some one should stop their mouths! Put them in irons! Oi, oi, what a beesness!"

Several men made a rush for Joe and Jim.

"Let them have it!" shouted Baseball Joe. "Keep them back till we can get over the rail."

"Right!" cried Jim joyfully, as he drew an iron bolt from his pocket. "Take that, you gunman! Take that, you water rat!"

A shower of missiles from the deadly right arms of the ballplayers laid several of their assail-

ants low. The rest drew back in dismay and reached for their firearms.

But that moment of hesitation was enough. Joe and Jim leaped to the rail and plunged downward into the sea.

Shots echoed in their ears. A bullet singed the back of Joe's head as he went under.

When they came to the surface, sputtering and shaking the water from their eyes, they saw the motorboat was only a few yards away.

"Take us abroad," shouted Joe. "Ahoy there, motorboat!"

The boat slowed down, swept alongside, and Joe and Jim were dragged on board, dripping but elated.

There were three men on the motorboat, an older man with silvery hair but a powerful frame and two younger men of about the same age as Joe and Jim.

Jim cried out and pointed to the *Clarabel*, which was bearing down directly upon them. Russnak had evidently decided that he would not give up his prisoners without a struggle.

The silver-haired pilot of the motorboat swung his craft around and made toward the nearest island.

Joe explained hurriedly.

"We have been kept prisoners on that boat," he said. "They blackjacked and kidnaped us in

New York. The master is a scoundrel and his crew is made up of desperate gunmen and water pirates. We don't want to get you into trouble."

"You won't," the pilot declared. "That boat thinks it can run us down. I'm here to prove that it can't."

Before the smaller boat could get under way, the *Clarabel* had come perilously close. It loomed above the little motorboat like a swiftly driven Nemesis. It seemed certain that it would cut it in two, as a knife goes through cheese.

But the pilot of the smaller boat bent over his engine and his craft fairly leaped through the water, leaving a trail of froth in its wake. The space widened between her and the *Clarabel* with incredible rapidity.

The white-haired pilot chuckled and patted his engine lovingly.

"I knew you'd show them your heels, old girl," he chortled. "You certainly can travel."

Joe and Jim could see a stocky figure dancing about at the rail of the *Clarabel*, waving its arms and occasionally varying the proceedings by tearing its hair.

"Russnak!" observed Jim, grinning.

"Don't you envy him his feelings?" asked Joe.

Although outraced, the *Clarabel* hung on in pursuit until she had almost reached the group of small islands.

Here the water was shallower and strewn with rocks, and the *Clarabel* shut off power, while Russnak, foaming with rage, tried to think what to do next.

The small boat with its light draught kept on, darting in and through narrow passageways, skimming the water like some bright-winged insect.

At last the pilot slackened speed and turned into a narrow inlet. The islands were semi-tropical in character, and the mouth of the inlet was almost completely concealed by a riot of shrubs and the overhanging branches of trees that grew close to the water's edge.

The pilot, managing his craft with consummate ease and skill, brought it to moorings beside a narrow dock, to which he made fast.

"If that boat can follow us in here, she's good," remarked the pilot, as he took out his pipe and filled it from his pouch.

"I hope we've seen the last of her and the gangsters on her," ejaculated Joe. "Thanks to you, I believe that's certain."

"Haven't had much chance for formal introductions," said the captain. "My name's Allenby, and these are my two sons. We're vacationing here on this bit of an island, but we live in New York."

Joe recognized the name as that of a wealthy

sportsman, well known in the metropolis, commodore of one of its many yacht clubs.

"My name's Matson," said Joe in return, "and this is my friend and brother-in-law, Mr. Barclay."

"Matson!" exclaimed one of the younger Allenbys, as introductions were acknowledged. "Any relation to the famous pitcher of the New York Giants?"

"A rather close relation," replied Joe. "In fact, I couldn't be closer. I'm Joe Matson of the Giants."

The sensation that this simple statement created was prodigious. The elder Allenby's pipe fell from his mouth, and all gazed at Joe as though they could not believe their ears.

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Allenby, when he could speak. "The famous Baseball Joe, the greatest pitcher in the country?"

"Baseball Joe, anyway," answered Joe.

"The nation's idol!" broke in one of the young fellows. "Many a time I've seen you pitch."

"And knock out a homer," added his brother. "Who on earth had the nerve to kidnap a man of your reputation?"

"A gang of gamblers who are betting against the Giants, I imagine," replied Joe, "and who think they can make a sure thing of it by getting Mr. Barclay and me out of the way."

"What an outrage!" snorted Mr. Allenby. "Gee whiz, but I'm glad it fell to my lot to help you out to-day! Tell us all about it."

Joe told his story quickly, with Jim helping out on the details. His auditors listened with breathless interest and exclamations of wonder and the most intense indignation.

"I suppose," said Mr. Allenby when Joe had finished, "that your main object in life is to get back home as quickly as possible."

"You bet it is!" replied Joe.

"Although I suppose 'home' is a long distance away," said Jim ruefully.

"Several days' journey," admitted the elder man. "And that's not counting the time you may have to wait before a steamer sails."

"It is, if they go in the ordinary way, Dad," put in the younger of the Allenbys.

Joe was quick to grasp at the significance of his tone.

"What other way is there?" he asked eagerly.

The young fellow turned toward him.

"A possible solution of your problem occurred to me just now," he stated. "I don't know that it would work, but it might."

The father interrupted.

"Were you thinking of Hartley Ross?" he asked.

"Hartley Ross!" Jim was quick to pick up the

name. "You mean Hartley Ross, the aviator?"

Young Allenby nodded.

"He is stopping at one of the neighboring islands here on his way to the United States," he explained.

Both Joe and Jim caught the implication and leaped at the chance indicated.

"If he would take us with him, it would cut days from the trip!" cried Joe. "What luck! What unbelievable luck!"

"Ross may not see it that way," observed Mr. Allenby dubiously. "He may have other plans."

"We can find out about that," declared Joe. "He turned to the younger Allenby. "How far is it to this island you speak of?" he asked.

"Only a short trip in this boat," Mr. Allenby interposed. "Do you want to start at once? I was hoping," he added hospitably, "that I could prevail on you to come up to the house and join us in a little refreshment. I'd rather entertain Baseball Joe and Jim Barclay than royalty."

The young men thanked him both for the invitation and the implied compliment. But they stressed their desire to start for home at the earliest possible moment.

The motorboat was unfastened from the dock and the pilot turned her nose toward open water.

In a little while they reached the island where Hartley Ross, the celebrated aviator, was staying

temporarily, and lost no time in looking up their man.

They found him on the porch of a one-story building, which, by courtesy, was called a hotel. The aviator was surrounded by a little group of men, all listening intently to a dissertation on stunt flying.

"There's no trick in it," he was saying, when, looking up, his eyes happened to rest on Joe.

He stopped short, staring incredulously. Then with scant ceremony he pushed himself through the men surrounding him and made straight for Joe.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" he demanded. "You are Joe Matson, aren't you?"

Joe admitted that he was and Ross struck out his hand.

"Put it there, Baseball Joe!" he exclaimed. "This sure is my lucky day!"

It was an auspicious beginning. If Hartley Ross was the baseball enthusiast he seemed to be, the players' battle was half won already.

Joe and Jim and their new friends were drawn into the group already there, and once more they told the story of the plot against them, the kidnapping, and their subsequent escape.

"We're here," finished Joe. "And our chief—in fact, our only object in life just now is to get

back to the United States in the shortest time possible. If we wait for boats and trains—”

Hartley Ross held up his hand.

“Say no more!” he cried. “It’s as good as done already. McRae’s star pitchers at the mercy of boats and trains? Never! Not when they can fly. When,” he demanded, with an engaging grin, “do you want to start?”

“Right away,” cried Joe and Jim in the same breath.

“That makes it unanimous,” declared Ross. “I was just getting ready for a take-off, anyway. Want to come out and view the old bus?”

This was better luck than either Joe or Jim had dared anticipate. Dame Fortune was beginning to smile at last!

CHAPTER XXIV

SAILING THE SKY

THE enthusiasm of Hartley Ross was infectious. The whole crowd followed him and the two ballplayers down to the field back of the hotel where the aviator's plane was resting.

"Isn't she a peach?" asked Ross with justifiable pride, as he patted the machine affectionately.

"She sure is," agreed Joe and Jim, as they looked with admiration on the monoplane, which was of the very latest make and designed especially for speed.

"I've named her the *Meteor*, and she's all of that," said Ross. "Can make a hundred and twenty miles an hour with ease and even more if she's pushed. But you'll see for yourselves. I've just had her oiled and refueled and she's ready to fly for a man's life. Jump in and we'll be off in ten minutes."

"Great!" exclaimed Joe. "But first is there any place here from which I can send a cablegram home?"

"Nothing like that in this neck of the woods,"

answered Hartley Ross. "You'll have to wait till you get to the States for that. You fellows just pitch into these sandwiches," indicating some edibles in the plane, "and take a swallow of coffee from this thermos bottle while I'm putting on the finishing touches."

Joe and Jim needed no urging, for they were ravenously hungry.

With the warmest of thanks to the Allenbys and with the well wishes of the assembled group ringing in their ears, Joe and Jim climbed aboard the plane.

Hartley Ross adjusted his flying helmet and goggles and buttoned his leather coat.

"Well, I've dreamed of honors," he laughed. "I suppose every man does, and aviators more than most. But one thing I never dreamed of or hoped for was that some day I'd serve as pilot to the most famous ballplayers of the world. Believe me, you folks, if I can get these two boys to the United States in time to pull the Giants' fat from the fire I won't need a press agent, never no more. All right, fellows? Let's go."

He hopped into the plane. The motor broke into a series of short, staccato barks, then settled into a steady hum. The plane taxied along the field, Ross pulled the joy stick, and the plane lifted into the air.

Ross circled once about the field, waved to the

cheering group below, and then headed out to sea.

Some distance out they sighted a ship that Joe and Jim recognized as the *Clarabel*.

"That's the boat that shanghaied us," shouted Joe to Ross. "Can you bring us over it, old man? We're hankering for one last greeting to the crew."

Ross grinned and waved his hand.

"Sure thing," he shouted. "Watch me."

The plane circled about the ship, dropping lower and lower. She was watched with languid curiosity by the dispirited crew.

Joe and Jim discovered the figure of Moe Russnak standing near the rail in an attitude of the utmost despondency.

As Ross brought the *Meteor* in one bold swoop close above the *Clarabel*, Joe leaned far out and waved to Russnak in an ironic salute.

Russnak started as he recognized him. He shook his fist in impotent range. Then he shouted some frantic orders to the crew.

"Up, quick, Ross!" warned Joe. "They may shoot."

The plane shot upward like an arrow, and none too soon, for there was a rattle of revolver shots that, however, fell short.

The last those in the plane saw of Russnak he was dancing about like a dervish and tearing his hair.

On the *Meteor* sped as though she knew the frantic impatience of her passengers to be once more on American soil. On over the waves of the Caribbean, on over the yeasty surges of the Atlantic, on over the billows of the Gulf of Mexico, heading as straight as an arrow for St. Louis.

Joe and Jim had consulted their schedules and knew that the Giants would be in St. Louis on the next day in their second swing about the Western circuit.

They were consumed with feverish impatience to know how the team had been going. For weeks they had not seen a newspaper. They hoped for the best, but they knew what a delicate mechanism is a baseball team and how easily that mechanism can be thrown out of gear by any unlooked-for happening.

Hartley Ross himself was not very definite, his latest news being more than ten days old. But he knew that at that time the Giants were in the dismal dumps and steadily falling to the rear of the other teams. And he knew of the enormous sensation that had been caused by the unexplained disappearance of Joe Matson and Jim Barclay.

"And believe me," he said, "there'll be some uproar when you boys turn up safe and sound. The papers won't have room for anything else."

"What time do you think you can be in St.

Louis?" asked Joe, having fairly to shout to be heard.

Ross glanced at his clock and his instruments and indulged in a mental calculation.

"At about three o'clock to-morrow afternoon, if this weather keeps up," he shouted back. "Perhaps in time for you to see part of the game between the Giants and the Cardinals. I'll land you in the flying field on the outskirts of the city, and from there a taxi can whirl you over to the ball park."

"Bully!" cried Joe and Jim in unison.

Hartley Ross came pretty near hitting the mark, for he landed at the flying field at St. Louis a little before four o'clock. Scarcely had the plane come to a stop than Baseball Joe and Jim leaped out, aflame with excitement.

"Never can pay the debt we owe you, old man," vociferated Joe, as he and Jim shook hands with the grinning aviator. "Have to rush now, but come around to the Giants' headquarters to-night and we'll have a jollification."

They hailed a taxi and were driven to the ball grounds, stopping only for a moment on the way to send a telegram to Riverside. Then, urged on by the promise of an extra reward, the taxi driver whizzed them along to the ball park.

The two pitchers slipped into the clubhouse, which at the moment contained no one but Dough-

erty, the Giants' trainer, who was slumped down moodily in a chair.

He looked up indifferently as the boys hurried in. Then he jumped to his feet as though moved by an electric shock, rushed toward them, and fairly hugged the breath out of them.

"By the great jumping John Rodgers!" he shouted, "where did you come from? How did you get here? What—what—"

He was getting incoherent with wonderment and joy.

"We're here," laughed Joe happily. "That's the main thing. Tell you all about it later. How's the game going?"

"Like most of our games lately," replied Dougherty. "They're slugging Merton all over the lot. Score seven to three in their favor."

"What inning?" queried Joe, shedding his coat and vest.

"The sixth," answered Dougherty.

"Give us some uniforms," commanded Joe. "Anything will do. Slip into one, Jim!"

CHAPTER XXV

INTO THE FRAY

IN a twinkling Dougherty had produced two uniforms and Baseball Joe and Jim donned them in a hurry. Then without further words they stepped out of the clubhouse.

McRae and Robbie, their faces grim and drawn as they watched the probable loss of another game, sat on the Giant bench near the grandstand.

Looking listlessly down the field from which the Giants were just coming in for their half of the seventh, McRae caught sight of the two advancing figures. He started convulsively, rubbed his eyes, and stared unbelievably.

"Robbie!" he yelled, "am I seeing things? Look!"

Without waiting for an answer and forgetting all his managerial dignity, he started running across the field. Robbie rushed after him as fast as his fat legs would carry him.

Now others had been stricken with equal wonder and delight, and there was a mad stampede toward Joe and Jim. In a moment they were in

the center of a howling, delirious mob, who almost tore their clothes from their backs. The umpire had called time and was coming with the rest.

Through the mob McRae forced his way and threw his arms about the returned wanderers. He could not speak coherently. Robbie was frankly blubbering.

There was a wild tumult of questions and answers, and then Joe and Jim were escorted in a triumphal procession to the bench and the game was resumed.

The baseball spectators had also recognized the newcomers and the stands fairly rocked with applause.

"Plenty of time to talk later," said Joe when he could make himself heard above the babel. "Just now it's this game that counts. How does it stand?"

"Seven to three," replied McRae, still scarcely knowing what he was saying. "They've got us going. I'll have to yank Merton out and take a chance on Markwith, I suppose. Oh, if I'd only had you here to start the game!"

"Not too late yet, perhaps," volunteered Joe. "That is, if you want me to. A lot can be done in three innings."

"You don't mean that you feel like pitching after the long journey?" asked McRae incred-

lously. "After sitting cramped in an airplane for twenty-four hours?"

"I'm willing to take a hack at it," replied Joe. "About time I was doing something to earn my salary," he added, with a grin.

"Go to it," returned McRae delightedly. "Won't it be an eyeful to see you in the box again! By the way, you'll have a time at bat in this very inning. Melton is second man up. You take his place."

While they were talking, Barrett had knocked out a single and was dancing about first. Joe picked out a bat and went to the plate. The shouting was renewed and seemed as though it would never stop, although the umpire held up his hand repeatedly in a demand for silence.

The first pitch by Hamilton went as a ball. The second was a roundhouse curve, and Joe smacked out a torrid liner between center and right that Wilson jumped for but could not reach. Before the ball could be retrieved Barrett had crossed the plate with Joe thundering close upon his heels.

"Is he there, John? Is the boy there?" shouted Robbie, dancing up and down like a madman.

"Forty ways from the ace," agreed McRae, his heart and mind in a happy tumult. "Now, Robbie, watch the Giants begin to climb."

That ended the scoring for the inning, but with

two runs wiped off the Cardinals' lead the Giants went out on the field with renewed confidence.

Not that they had much to do. For Joe, despite his long absence from the box, pitched like a man possessed. His heart sang within him. He held his opponents in the hollow of his hand. The ball dodged, twisted, squirmed in bewildering convolutions. He had never been more sure of himself.

One after the other the Cards came to the plate and swung savagely at the ball. One after the other they went back disconsolately to the bench. "Richard was himself again," and when Baseball Joe was himself it was time for the opposing batsmen to take to the tall timber.

"Now, you false alarms," barked McRae at his men, as the Giants came in for their half of the eighth, "it's time for you to quit loafing and go to work. Joe will hold the other fellows down, but it's up to you to do some hitting. Hear me?"

They heard him perfectly, and, inspired by Joe's return to the team, got to Hamilton for two runs, tying the score.

The eight was hitless for St. Louis, not a man getting to first.

In the Giants' half of the ninth Curry went out on a grounder to third that was hurried over to first in time. Larry made a gallant try with a

clout to left that Amstad gathered in after a hard run.

"Now, Joe," urged McRae, "put the climax to that pitching of yours. We need this game awfully, and you're the only one who can give it to us."

"I'll try," promised Joe.

Hamilton tried to pass him, but his control was bad and the ball came within Joe's reach. He promptly hammered it into the center field bleachers for a homer and crossed the plate amid an uproar such as had not been heard that season on the St. Louis field.

That mammoth blow sewed up the game, for in the Cardinals' half of the ninth Joe set them down in order. The Giants had come from behind and triumphed by a score of eight to seven!

There was rejoicing without stint at the Giants' headquarters that night. The hotel was thronged with baseball fans and reporters, anxious to learn all the details of Joe's and Jim's adventures. The wires were busy carrying those details to all parts of the country.

That news made public, every agency was put to work to ferret out the scoundrels and especially to effect the capture of the *Clarabel's* master and crew.

Jim pitched the next day a superb game, and from start to finish there was little doubt of the

result. The Giants played behind him like demons and won by the one-sided score of nine to two.

That was the last game of the Giants' second Western trip, and that evening the team started for home. But Joe and Jim had been "ordered" by McRae to stop over at Riverside for two days before reporting in New York.

Did they obey that order? They did. And when they burst into the door of that little cottage and swept Mabel and Clara into their arms, when everybody was laughing and crying at the same time, when Mr. and Mrs. Matson had the breath squeezed out of them, when Reggie lost his monocle and hopped around trying to get in somewhere—but what use trying to describe it? Who can describe paradise?

CHAPTER XXVI

AN UPHILL STRUGGLE

THE two delightful days in Riverside came to an end all too soon. Again and again Baseball Joe and Jim had to tell all the details of Russnak's knavery and the thrilling story of escape from the toils that he and his fellow-roguers had woven about them.

"They ought to be hung!" declared Mabel hotly, as she snuggled closer to Joe.

"Hanging's too good for them!" exclaimed Clara, smoothing Jim's hand.

"The Lord will deal with them," said good Mrs. Matson. "I'm so thankful to get the boys back that I'm not thinking much of vengeance."

"I am!" declared Jim, with emphasis. "I'd like five minutes with Russnak alone and then I could die happy."

The boys had the pleasure of seeing one of the games of the Valley League, and their pleasure was doubled by the fact that the Riversides trounced the Pentolias. The former had a good lead now on all the clubs of the league and the

prospects were bright for once more winning the championship. Reggie had made good as the active manager of the club, and Mr. Matson's conservatism and good business judgment had borne fruit already in a substantial balance on the right side of the ledger.

It was hard to let the boys go, but the girls were so relieved and rejoiced at their restoration to them that they yielded with a better grace than usual, with the promise on the part of Joe and Jim that Mabel and Clara should come on to the metropolis for the wind-up games of the season.

Arriving in New York, Joe and McRae had a heart-to-heart talk.

"I'm not disguising from you, Joe," said the Giants' manager, "that the outlook is bad for the Giants copping the pennant. That scoundrel Russnak has put a crimp in our plans for the season that I'm afraid has knocked us out of the running. All our early lead has melted away and we're about at the tail end of the league. It looks as though we'd do well if we finished in the first division."

"Not much nourishment in that," replied Joe. "I want to finish first. That's where the Giants belong."

"I agree with you," said McRae. "And if the season were not so far advanced, that's where we would finish. But the age of miracles is past."

There are four clubs ahead of us, the Cubs, the Pittsburghs, the Reds and the Brooklyns. We're bunched up with the Bostons, the Phillies and the Cardinals, with not much to choose between us. Of course, we're not going to stay in the ruck, now that you and Jim are back. But as to finishing in front—well, that's something else again. We might show our heels to the Brooklyns and the Reds. I think we shall. But the Cubs and the Pittsburghs have been making hay while the sun shone and now they're about a dozen games to the good. That's an awful lead at this stage of the season. Suppose one of them fell down. It's beyond reason that both should. A stern chase is a long chase, especially with comparatively few games to go."

"Cut out the gloom talk, Mac," said Joe. "The Giants are going to win the pennant."

"That's the kind of talk!" cried McRae, giving Joe a resounding slap on the knee. "That's what I expected you to say. I've purposely given the worst side of it so that you'd know what you were up against. But I've seen you do wonders before, and I'm counting on seeing you do them again. With your pitching and batting and headwork, all things are possible. I'm going to leave everything to you. What you say goes. Go to it, old boy."

And Joe went to it.

First he called the men of the club together.

"I've brought you here, boys," he said, when they were assembled in the clubhouse, "to tell you that the Giants are going to win the pennant."

There was a cheer at this, although some looks of wonderment were exchanged by the players.

"No, I'm not crazy," went on Joe, when the cheers had subsided. "I know that it's a tough job. But I've summered and wintered you boys for a long time, and I know the stuff you're made of. Are you going to take the dust of the Western lads, going to let them crow over you? Not if you're the Giants I know. We're going to knock the tar out of them. We're going to show them where they get off. We're going to play baseball by day, eat baseball at meals, dream baseball at night. We're going to use our muscles and heads every minute of the time. We're going to cop the flag and raise it on the old flagpole at the Polo Grounds."

This time the cheering threatened to lift the roof. Joe's fiery talk had set them all aflame.

"No even breaks this time," went on Joe. "No being satisfied with two games while the other fellows get two. That won't get us anywhere. Four out of four is what I want. Oh, once in a while of course we'll lose a game. But I want those occasions to be few and far between. We

play the Phillies next. I want you to sweep the series. The same with the Bostons. With the Brooklyns I want three out of four and if possible the whole four. You see I'm greedy. But you've got to give me those games. Hear me? You've just *got* to cop them!"

"We'll do it!" yelled Larry, his Irish blood at fever heat, and a chorus of similar shouts arose from his comrades.

They did it. Inspired by Joe's fiery spirit and consummate generalship, they swept the board. All the Eastern teams looked alike to them. The Phillies, the Bostons and the Dodgers came along simply to be slaughtered. One of the games went to fourteen innings, another to seventeen, but each ended with a victory for the Giants. They were playing like fiends. They simply would not be beaten.

The outfielders made seemingly impossible catches. The infield played errorless ball. The pitchers were in splendid form. Joe and Jim went in every third day, instead of the usual four or five days' interval. Markwith showed the form which at one time had made him the sensation of the league. Brady and Merton outdid themselves.

Steadily and rapidly the Giants climbed. They made especial progress while the Reds and Cubs and Pittsburghs were fighting each other. From

being thirteen games behind the leader, the Giants crept up until they were eleven behind, nine behind, seven behind, ever moving toward the front.

In their swing around the Eastern circuit they won ten games out of twelve. Then came the Western trip, and although the opposition was more formidable, the Giants won twelve out of sixteen. It was a wonderful comeback and the whole country was wild with excitement.

The Cubs in the meantime had gained a clear lead over the other teams and were playing sterling ball. It became evident that they would fight it out with the Giants for the pennant.

Fighting tooth and nail, they drew closer together. The Giants kept closing the gap, but time was on the side of the Cubs. And when the latter came to the Polo Grounds for the last three games of the season they were two games to the good.

One victory would give the Cubs the championship!

On the other hand the Giants would have to capture all three games to win the flag.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NO-HIT GAME

It was improbable that the Giants would win all three games against such formidable opponents as the Cubs. The law of averages was against it. That the Chicagos would fail to win a single game seemed incredible, the more incredible because the Cubs were groomed to the minute, were in superb condition with all their regulars in their places, the team working like a well-oiled machine.

Just at that critical time when the Giants needed every ounce of strength they possessed, Fate dealt them a heavy blow. Melton, their star shortstop, pulled up with the Charley horse two days before the games with the Cubs and was wholly out of the series. Baseball Joe would have to depend on Jervis to fill that position.

The latter was a good player, but by no means Melton's equal. Then, too, this was his first year in the big league, and in a critical series like this on which the flag depended the youngster was apt to get rattled.

Curry, the reliable outfielder, had a kink in his arm that hindered his throwing. He had been famous for his ability to send the ball on a line to the plate in the attempt to cut off a run. Now he would have to relay the ball. But even with this handicap, his heavy batting could not be spared and he had to stay in the line-up.

In the pitching staff, Markwith and Brady of the first string had weakened under the terrific strain attending the Giants' winning streak. Merton, too, had grown a bit unsteady and erratic. Rockby, Teller and Moore, although they had turned in some good games, suffered under the same disadvantage as Jervis, of this being their first year in the big league.

To cap it all, Larry at second had split his hand a couple of weeks before in stopping a terrific liner, and though it had healed it was still tender and rendered him slow on double plays, where every fraction of a second counted.

So that it was not surprising that the New York fans and most of the players viewed the series with a good deal of trepidation. With a team of cripples they had to face a powerful team already in the lead and flushed with confidence. And that team had to win only one while the "cripples" had to take all three!

It was an outlook to daunt any ordinary captain. But it did not daunt Baseball Joe. He was

never more indomitable than when he was leading a forlorn hope.

His own arm was in superb shape. The harder he worked the better it seemed to be. Jim, too, was in splendid condition. If Joe was the best, Jim was undeniably the second best twirler in the league.

"I know that you're a miracle man, Joe," said McRae, "but if you cop this series with all the odds against you, it will be the climax."

"Stop worrying, Mac," said Joe. "Put in your order for the flag. We're going to get it. We'll stand those birds on their heads. Jim and I will do the pitching. We won't have to save ourselves now, and we'll put everything we've got on the ball. You just sit back and watch our smoke."

If the extra seats that McRae had put on the Polo Grounds had been thirty thousand, they would still have been insufficient to accommodate the throng that clamored at the gates for admission to the first game of the series. Long before the time set for the game to begin the stands were packed and standing room was at a premium.

The acclamations that rose when Joe picked up his glove and went to the box showed plainly where the crowd's hopes rested.

But louder still was the uproar when Joe set down on strikes the first three men of the boasted

"Murderers' Row," as fast as they came to the plate.

Again and again Joe had to lift his cap as, flushed and happy, he went to the bench.

Allison was on the mound for the Cubs, and from the first ball pitched that had plenty of smoke upon it showed that he was in fine fettle. Burkett went out on a foul, Curry struck out and Barrett rapped a grounder down the first base line that was gathered in without any trouble.

The Cubs in their second inning again went scoreless. Bassett, who had not been able to solve Joe all season, was set down on strikes, much to the crowd's gratification. The next man up tried to bunt, but Joe was on the ball like a hawk and, running over, touched the man out. A foul to Mylert ended the inning.

When Joe came to the plate amid frantic urgings from the crowd to hit a homer, Allison looked him over carefully. What he saw did not seem to please him, and he motioned his catcher to stand wide of the plate.

The crowd caught on and booed derisively, but Allison, with roseate visions of a pennant in the offing, was in no mood to take any chances. He deliberately pitched four wide balls and Joe trotted to first.

On the first ball pitched he made a dazzling steal of second, beating the ball by a foot.

Allison, shaken a bit by the steal, started his wind-up for the next pitch. Joe had taken a long lead, and while Allison was at the top of his swing was already legging it for third, getting there by a long slide in the dust.

The cub infield moved closer in so that if Ralston, who was at bat, should hit in the diamond they might cut Joe off at the plate. Of course it was up to Ralston to sacrifice with a long fly to the outfield if possible.

Joe danced around third, trying to draw a throw. Twice Allison snapped the ball over to catch him, but Joe got back to the bag in time.

Now Joe took an especially long lead. It seemed too long to Allison and again he hurled to Hannigan. The latter caught the ball and dabbed down to catch Joe sliding into the bag. But Joe was not there!

Instead he was tearing down the third base line like a deer for home.

Startled at Joe's daring, Hannigan straightened up and threw the ball to the catcher. Twenty feet from the plate Joe hurled himself to the ground and slid into the rubber, Sinton missing him by a hair's-breadth.

"Safe!" cried the umpire, and the stands went wild.

Allison's strategy had failed that time. He

had given Joe a base. That ungrateful athlete had stolen three more!

Ralston went out on a foul, McCarty from short to first, and Bowen ended the inning with a fly to center.

The score now was one to nothing in favor of the Giants and there it remained till the end of the sixth. Joe was pitching beautiful ball, the kind that had made him the greatest twirler in the world.

He toyed with his opponents. Evans, the Chicago manager, raved and fumed, fairly blistered his men with the taunts and sarcasm he launched at them. It was of no use. Joe had them swinging like a gate.

Allison, too, was pitching an excellent game. In six innings the Giants had garnered five hits but no two in succession. And many a blow that might have been a hit was turned into an out by the splendid work of the Chicago fielders.

Joe in the meantime had not allowed a single hit. And now, with the game two-thirds over, the crowd waked up to the fact that possibly they were going to see that rarest thing in baseball—a no-hit game!

Not that Joe was depending wholly on strikeouts. He was saving his arm for the last game. Frequently he let them hit the ball. But they hit it where he wanted them to. Now in the dirt, now

up in the air. Easy fielding chances, all of them, so easy that not one got away from the clutches of the Giants.

Chicago's seventh inning came and passed. So did the eighth. Not a semblance of a hit. The crowd was hypnotized. They were seeing baseball history made.

In the Giants' half of the eighth, an unwary slip by Allison let the ball come within reach of Joe's bat and he clouted it into the right-field stands for a homer.

The mad cheering over this exploit was still going on when the Cubs came up for their last chance.

Now, to make assurance doubly sure, Joe cut loose with his snake ball and it was all over but the shouting. He mowed down the side as a scythe cuts the grass, and the shout that went up when the last man was struck out could have been heard for a mile.

The Giants had triumphed by a score of two to nothing. And Baseball Joe had pitched a no-hit game and scored both runs!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WIZARD WINS

THERE was jubilation in the ranks of the Giants and New York was aflame with excitement on the night following that epic battle.

Now the lead of the Cubs had been reduced to a single game. To be sure, the odds were still heavily in their favor. Of the two remaining games they had to take only one to win the pennant. The Giants would have to win both.

Mabel and Clara, who had come on to see the deciding games, were exultant beyond words.

"It was wonderful, Joe, wonderful!" Mabel repeated again and again, and her praise was sweeter to Joe than all the laudations he had received from the maddened crowds.

"And Jim will be sure to win to-morrow," declared Clara, with wifely pride and loyalty.

The telephone bell rang and Baseball Joe answered it.

"It's from McRae," he informed them. "What's that, Mac? You've got them? Glory hallelujah! Where do you say they are? In the

Tombs? Good! Won't Jim be glad when I tell him!"

There was a minute or two more of excited interchanges, and then Joe hung up the receiver and turned to his companions, who were fairly bursting with impatience.

"They've nabbed Russnak!" he cried. "At the same time they've gathered in most of the rest of his gang, Hupft, McCarney, a fellow named Glutz, another one named Haney and one or two more. Hupft, it seems, has offered to turn State's evidence and has told the whole story to the District Attorney. They've got them dead to rights."

There was a hubbub of delighted exclamations.

"I hope they give them life sentences," said Mabel.

"There's just one fly in the ointment," declared Jim. "That is that I can't have that five minutes with Russnak alone that I was longing for."

"There's one thing that we've got to remember," put in Joe. "Even if they are arrested, they still stand to win their bets if the Giants lose. That would help a lot in smoothing the rough edges off their imprisonment. Gee, Jim, we mustn't let them do that!"

"You're right, we mustn't," agreed Jim. "I'm going to pitch to-morrow as I never did before. I'll have two ends in view, one to win for the

Giants, the other to down that oily Moe Russnak and the rest of his gang."

Those two mighty motives proved sufficient, for Jim Barclay fairly outdid himself in that second game. Never had he been in such splendid form.

He needed to be, for he had to carry the burden almost by himself. Twice during that game the young recruits that were filling in for the Giants had a case of rattles. Errors by Jervis and Dilworth let in a couple of unearned runs. But Jervis atoned in part for his error by a three-bagger that brought in two runs, and homers by Burkett and Barrett accounted for two more, and this with Jim's air-tight pitching put the game in the Giants' batbag by the score of four to two.

Now, indeed, the city boiled over. The lead of the Cubs had been wiped out. The teams were on an even footing. The result of the next day's game would decide the championship of the National League.

All through the country the fans were waiting for the result with bated breath. Seldom had there been such a rip-snorting finish to a baseball season. The whole sporting population of the country was up in the air.

"It's all up to you, now, Joe," said McRae, as Joe strolled up to the bench before the game. "I'm banking heavily on you, old boy."

"You can, John," declared Robbie. "Did that

boy ever fail you in a pinch? The game is in right now. It's only a matter of the score."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about Joe," returned McRae. "He'll do his share and more. If only the boys will give him the right support!

"They will," declared Joe, with confidence.

But his confidence in that support was not as strong as his words implied. Not but what the Giants would play their heads off to win. But the rookies were an uncertain quantity, as had been shown the day before. Their errors then had come very close to neutralizing Jim's splendid work in the box.

Also, there had been other bits of shakiness that Joe's keen eyes had noted the day before, which, while they had not figured in the score, might easily have been fatal had not good luck intervened. The tremendous strain under which the boys had labored in that gallant winning streak had taken a lot out of them. Their nerves had been worn down to the breaking point. They were "jumpy."

All this Baseball Joe was revolving in his mind as amid tremendous cheering he took his position in the box for the first pitch. Before that ball whizzed over the plate for a strike his decision was made. It was made only to himself, but for him it had all the solemnity of an oath.

One after the other he set down Halley, Hanni-

gan and Tench on strikes as fast as they came to the plate.

It was a promising beginning for the Giants and the stands rocked with applause.

"That's pitching them!" exulted McRae, as he slapped Joe on the back.

Evans, the Chicago manager, had been saving up his star, Maitland, for that critical game, and that veteran showed that he had plenty of stuff. Burkett lifted an easy foul to the catcher. Curry rolled a bouncer to short that got to first in plenty of time and Barrett went out on a fly to center.

Excitement was tense as Baseball Joe, in the Cubs' half of the second, repeated the dose that he had given them in the first. Not a batsman touched the ball. They came up savagely, went back sheepishly.

"Six strike-outs in succession!" breathed McRae. "Pinch me, Robbie, to see if I'm dreaming."

Joe was first to bat for the Giants and Maitland promptly passed him to first on balls, a practice he followed throughout the game. Dilworth sacrificed him to second, from which he made a dazzling steal of third. McCarty knocked up a Texas leaguer that was gathered in by the short-stop, compelling Joe to hug the base. Then Bowen clouted a single to right, and Joe came galloping over the plate for the first run of the

game. Bowen was out trying to stretch the single into a double and the inning ended. But the Giants had drawn first blood.

Again the Cubs tried to get to Joe and failed. He was pitching phenomenal ball. There were tantalizing curves that broke just beyond reach of the bats, fast balls that roared down the middle when least expected. But where the ball was the bats were not, and the three men went out in order. It was pitching wizardry.

"The whole Chicago team at the bat and not a sniff at the ball!" murmured McRae in a daze. "Am I going crazy, Robbie? Notice anything queer about me?"

"If you're crazy, you've got lots of company," gurgled Robbie, in vast delight. "The whole crowd have gone nuts. Gee, but the boy's a wizard!"

For the fourth, fifth and sixth innings the uncanny spectacle continued. Not a man touched the ball even for a foul.

The surprising thing was the ease with which Joe was working. He was grace itself and every move was a poem. Other hearts in that vast audience were doing all kinds of stunts. Joe's never missed a beat. To all appearances he might have been tossing them over in spring practice instead of in a game on which the championship depended.

The Giants in the meantime had gathered in another run on a single by Burkett and a two-bagger by Curry.

By this time the crowd had waked up to the fact that they were seeing something they had never seen before. Eighteen strike-outs in succession! And that not against sand-lotters, but against a team comprising some of the most murderous sluggers in the league. When would the break come?

It did not come in the seventh, which, however, was enlivened by an unusual incident.

Bassett, the mighty hitter, was one of the victims, and as the last strike whizzed by him he hurled the bat at Joe in a fit of uncontrollable rage.

It came near hitting Joe, and instantly there was a tremendous uproar. Joe's mates rushed in, Bassett's companions gathered about him, and a fight was imminent.

By a mighty effort the umpire maintained order and banished Bassett from the game.

"Aw, I didn't do it on purpose," growled Bassett. "A bee stung me and the bat jerked out of my hand."

"Let's see your hand," demanded the umpire. There was no sign of a swelling. "That will be enough for you," said the umpire sternly. "To the clubhouse for yours!"

Joe was not flustered by the occurrence, and to show that he was not, registered three more strikeouts in the eighth. He was keeping the vow he had made to himself before the game started!

The Cubs now were hypnotized. In vain their manager stormed and fumed.

"It's a ghost ball he has," declared Hannigan in protest against Evans's objurgations. "He's put a spell on it. It ain't right. He's in league with the witches."

A breathless silence settled down on the crowds, watching with fascinated eyes, as the Cubs came in for their last chance. They might as well have stayed out, and the Giants might as well have called in all their players, except the pitcher and catcher.

Baseball Joe now called on his snake ball and wound up the game in a blaze of glory by striking out the side in order.

When the last man went out the scene on the Polo Grounds surpassed description. The crowds went raving crazy. They had seen the Giants win the championship and they had been witnesses of the greatest feat in baseball history, a feat that stamped Baseball Joe as a pitching wizard, the greatest twirler that had ever stood in the box.

After the tumult and the shouting had died, after the newspapers for days had exhausted their stock of adjectives in discussing Joe's exploit, after

Mabel had laughed and wept in Joe's arms from sheer, unspeakable happiness, a happiness shared without stint by Jim and Clara, Mr. and Mrs. Matson and Reggie, they had time to think of the scoundrels who had come so near to wrecking all their hopes. Those knaves got short shrift. Russnak was sent to prison for ten years and the others got five years each.

The climax to Joe's satisfaction came when Riverside won the flag in the Valley League after a grueling struggle that endured till the last week of the season.

"A great year in many ways, honey," Joe remarked to Mabel in the privacy of their room. "And the greatest thing of all was the Giants' winning of the championship."

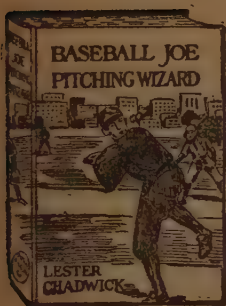
"The Giants!" sniffed Mabel. "What did they have to do in that last game? You won the championship!"

THE END

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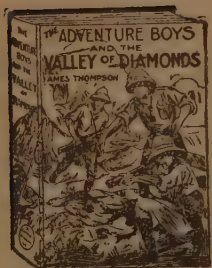
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